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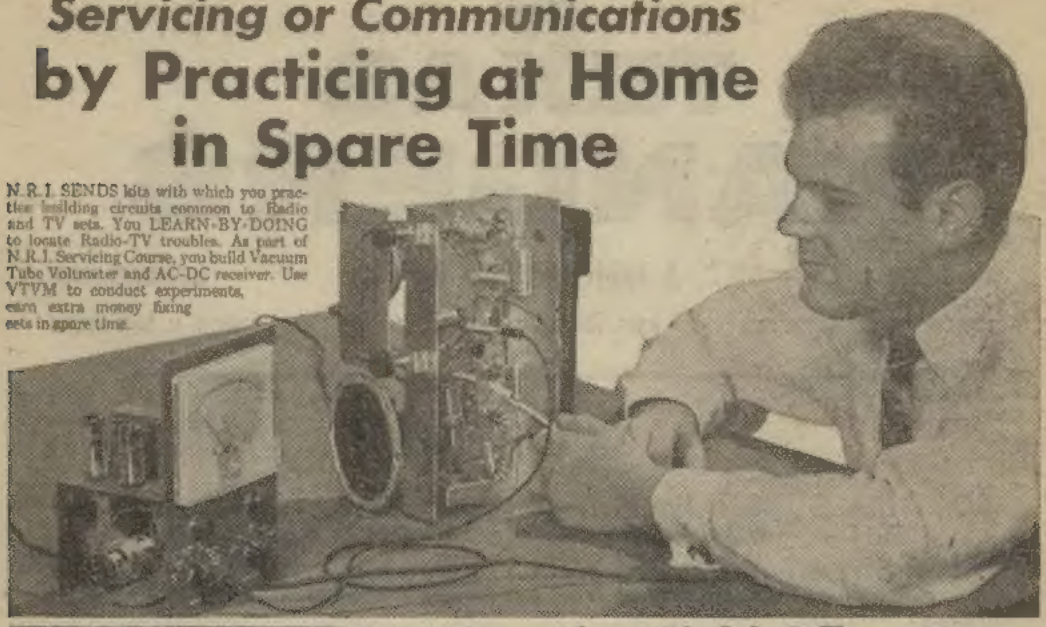

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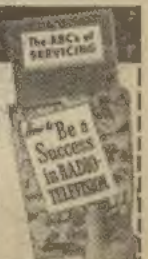

TEXAS RANGERS

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LUCK OF THE IRISH

COWPOKE Ed Brannon was regarded by one and all around Little Springs, Utah, as one uncommonly lucky gent. "Ain't nothin' can happen to that jasper, less'n it's good," was the consensus of opinion among those who knew him. "He's got the luck of the Irish, for sure!"

It seemed that way, all right. The redheaded Irisher, whose temper matched his hair, had been thrown from a plunging horse, knocked down by a stampeding herd and had been twice struck by lightning. He had survived them all, plus a dozen other mishaps, any one of which would have put most other men six feet under or on the permanently disabled list. But even Ed Brannon himself didn't realize the full extent of his luck until the fateful evening of July 6, 1893.

Usually, Brannon did passably well in his gambling, but this particular night the card tables and roulette wheel of the Paradise Saloon had given him a real shellacking. This fact, coupled with the rotgut whisky which he had stowed away with increasing frequency as his gambling luck soured, had served to put Brannon in a nasty frame of mind.

Taking an unreasoning dislike for a lone drinker, whose back was turned to him, the young redhead began heaping insults on him. The man gave no sign that he heard, but Brannon noted with drunken satisfaction that the drinker's jaw muscles had tightened.

"What's the matter? Figure you're too good to drink with the likes of us?" Brannon continued his tirade. "Listen, mister, when I talk to some hombre, I expect him to face me. You hear?" Brannon gripped the man's shoulder and spun him.

Suddenly the cowpoke's hand dropped away as though he had unwittingly stuck it into a viper's nest which, in a manner of speaking, he had just done. The face and description of the man he had been abusing was as familiar to him as it was to everybody who looked at Wanted Posters.

A gasp swept through the saloon. "It's Pete Hughes, the gunman! Ed Brannon's bought himself some real grief this time. Hughes will kill him for sure!"

Pete Hughes was a badly wanted stage robber and gunman who was famous for his lightning draw. The redhead wouldn't stand a prayer against such opposition and he knew it. "Forget what I been saying, mister," Ed practically begged. "I just been funnin' you. If I'd knowed—"

He stopped talking at the sight of the lethal light in the gunman's eyes and his purpling face. Talk had got him into this fix, but it sure wouldn't get him out.

In a voice choking with rage, Pete Hughes said, "You been digging a grave with that fancy mouth of yours, fella. Now I'm going to fill it—with you!"

Both men went for their guns while everybody else in the Paradise Saloon went for cover. But to everyone's amazement it was Pete Hughes, not Ed Brannon, who suddenly pitched forward on his face into the sawdust. And yet not a shot had been fired! An examination disclosed that the gunman had died—of heart failure!

And from that day on, everyone agreed that men just didn't come any luckier than a redheaded Irish cowpoke name of Ed Brannon.

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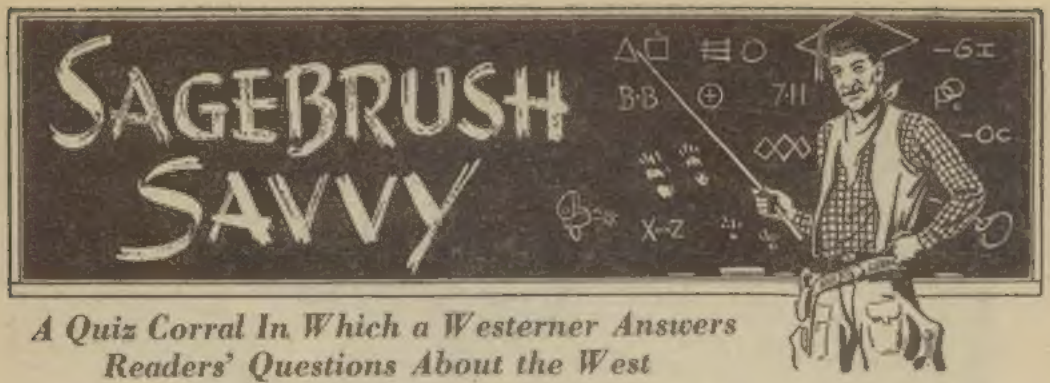

A Quiz Corral In Which a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—What is the difference between a snaffle and a curb bit?—G.R.T. (Ind.)

A.—A snaffle is a bit made in two pieces loosely interlocked in the middle. A curb is a single solid bar with an upward curve like an inverted "u" in the middle. This curve is called a "port" and the longer and more abrupt it is, the more severe the bit. In the West a snaffle is rarely used except in a harness or driving bridle. Riding bridles almost all have some degree of curb.

Q.—To change the stirrup length on a Western saddle, which is better, leather lacing or a buckle?—A.J. (N.J.)

A.—Cowboys use lacing exclusively, not only because it stays put better than a buckle (which makes it safer) but also because laced stirrup leathers lie flatter under the leg. Some dude ranches, where a saddle may have a different rider every day, use buckles because they make it easier and quicker to change stirrup length. But a working cowhand's saddle is rarely ridden by anybody else, and if there is one thing he doesn't like, it is having the length of his stirrups changed.

Q.—Does the cowboy word "chouse" mean the same as "chase" or "drive?"—T.T.F. (Mich.)

A.—No. To the ranch cowboy to "chouse" cattle means to handle them roughly, drive them too fast, or otherwise stir them up needlessly.

Q.—Are quarter horses actually a separate breed or just a special type of saddle horses? —Bill D. (N.H.)

A.—Quarter Horses (notice that I use capitals) are a distinct breed originally developed from individual stallions and mares of a certain type, but now having a Registry Stud Book of their own, governed by the American Quarter Horse Association. If you are specially interested in Quarter Horses, THE QUARTER HORSE JOURNAL published at Amarillo, Texas is devoted exclusively to the breed.

Q.—Was there ever such a thing as a white buffalo?—S. W. (Md.)

A.—Yes. Albinos seem to turn up in every species of animal. As near as I can learn, only about 35 white buffalo were ever found among the many thousands slaughtered in the days of the thundering herds.

Q.—Were Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson ever personally acquainted?—M.V.B. (Ky.)

A.—Yes. Both served as peace officers in Dodge City at the same time.

Q.—Which was quicker on the draw, John Wesley Hardin or Billy the Kid?—Alex C. (Iowa)

A.—They never met, but I believe old-timers will agree that Hardin, often called the fastest gun in Texas, would have had it all over the Kid in a gun-drawing match.

Q.—Are yucca and the century plant the same?—A.H.H. (N.C.)

A.—No, but the century plant is a broad-leafed member of the yucca or Spanish bayonet family, somewhat similar to *maguey*.

———*S. Omar Barker*

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BOOTHILL GUNS

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

A killer-bandit was at large in the town of Frontera, and the Lone Wolf had both feet in the grave before he tagged the guilty one

CHAPTER I

Funeral in Frontera

RIO BARNETT sat by the window of his upper-story room in Frontera's only hotel, the Oasis. He kept any eye on the storm outside while he went about the business of cleaning and oiling the six-shooters which were the tools of his trade.

Frontera was crowded for the big funeral today; the hotel was booked solid by out-of-towners. Barnett's room, however, had been reserved by the anonymous local citizen who had imported the El Paso gunman for a hold-up job.

Meeting in a secret rendezvous last night, Barnett's employer had made the job sound simple. Too simple. Rob the Wells Fargo safe this afternoon while Frontera's attention was on the big open-air funeral services in the town plaza for their late marshal "Bullet" Bob McTavish. Later, with the loot safely hidden, Rio Barnett would join the mourners up at the hilltop graveyard. What could be easier?

What could possibly go wrong?

But they hadn't counted on the treachery of West Texas climate. Only two hours before the funeral was to commence, a sudden and violent summer sandstorm blew up, driving the populace indoors, making the plaza as untenable as the roundabout desert. What if the funeral was postponed a day? Tomorrow would be too late to lift the loot now reposing in the Wells Fargo safe.

Inside of an hour the storm had racked up mile-high yellow dust clouds. Wind driven grit scoured the rows of false fronts which faced each other across Frontera's broad main street. Angry gusts smote the town with Jovian fury, swirling dirt into the freshly-dug grave up on boothill, lifting a few more shingles from the bald patches on the roof of the boarded-up Pioneer Grocery. The window panes where Rio Barnett waited shivered and rattled. Through the swirling dust out there, the El Paso gunman could see the plaza a block down the street. It was deserted.

At one-forty-five, Barnett went down to the lobby to make inquiries about the funeral. He got good news from the clerk.

"The coroner is transferrin' the services," the hotel man explained, "over to the only building in town big enough to hold the crowd. The service'll be in Barney Koontz's dancehall alongside the Alamo Saloon."

The news, the clerk went on to say, had been received with dismay in some quarters, ribald glee in others. Some said it would be a sight to see, Reverend Helmbold delivering a funeral sermon inside the honkytonk he had condemned so often from the pulpilt. But, quite apart from the sacrilegious overtones of holding a funeral in a dancehall, there was a note of ironic fitness in the whole thing. Had not Bob McTavish, during his violent career behind the star, fought and won gun battles inside the Alamo Saloon? How many times had he locked up this dancehall?

Rio Barnett returned to his solitary vigil in his upstairs room, aloof from the town's crosscurrents. He had never been in Frontera before and never expected to be again. He was being well paid to perform a job which fitted his talents, and the risks were minimum, considering the size of the expected loot.

All that was required of him was to keep secret, in the years to come, the name of the Frontera citizen who had masterminded the foolproof plot and cut Barnett in half for the take.

At five minutes before two o'clock, Rio Barnett saw coroner X. T. Keele's glass-sided hearse, pulled by four black horses whose hames were festooned with bobbing black plumes. It brought McTavish's coffin down the alley alongside the Alamo Saloon. He watched the old marshal's friends, some of them called here from afar as they filed into the dancehall next door, glad to get shelter from the blinding fury of the tempest.

McTavish's death left a big hole in Frontera. The cowtown was having difficulty in realizing that the marshal who had kept law and order here for three decades past was gone. Somehow, everyone West of the Pecos had come to regard the salty old star-packer as a landmark, an almost indestructible individual.

Ironically, McTavish had not died as dangerously as he had lived. Two generations of Fronterans had heard McTavish boast that he would die with his boots on —but fate had decreed otherwise.

Barnett had chuckled over the story. A week short of his seventy-third birthday, McTavish had cut his ankle on a rusty nail while stepping out of the zinc bathtub at the barbershop. He had neglected the scratch and lockjaw had set in. He had died in bed, ingloriously and ignominiously—with his boots off.

X. T. Keele, the local coroner and undertaker as well as being the Overland Telegraph operator, was a man with an eye for showmanship. He realized he would be conducting the funeral of an old-timer who had helped blaze trails in Texas history. He was determined, therefore, that the marshal's funeral should be memorable, to make up for the anti-climax of his passing.

To bring this about, Keele packed McTavish's mortal remains in ice. Then, with his town telegraph key, he dispatched messages far and wide to various frontier characters who had known and loved the old lawman during his life—the Governor of the state, sheriffs of neighboring counties, Texas Rangers, commanding officers of West Texas army posts. For their benefit, Keele's telegrams stated, the funeral of Bullet Bob McTavish would be delayed one full week, to enable them to attend

AT TWO o'clock sharp, the scheduled hour for the sad rites to get under way, Rio Barnett buckled on his twin Colts and made his way down to the street. It tickled his sense of humor to realize that the red bandanna he was knotting over his face to keep the dust out of his nose and mouth was the same mask he would be donning for the Wells Fargo hold-up a few minutes from now.

There was not a soul on the street, as far as Barnett could see in either direction, when he crossed over to the Alamo Saloon. The barroom side of the building was locked up; the gambling tables had been hastily moved from the dancehall side of the building into the barroom, to make room for the two hundred-odd mourners

As Rio Barnett eased himself through the dancehall doors, he could tell by the hush in the semi-darkness of the barnlike room that the funeral service was about to get under way. The townspeople and ranchers from the roundabout area crowded the dance floor proper; the out-of-town visitors, including a number of politicians and lawmen whose names were known throughout Texas, had been moved up front, as close as they could get to the elevated stage on which McTavish's silver-handled walnut coffin rested on a bier consisting of two sawhorses with planks across them.

That stage, originally designed for Barney Koontz's celebrated chorus of painted beauties to dance the can-can—was a glittering island of blazing lamplight in the otherwise darkened saloon. The full glare of the lamps was being shielded from the audience's eyes by the tin footlight reflectors rimming the front of the stage. Six men, all of them strangers to Rio Barnett, stood to one side of the coffin and were, the gunman deduced, the pallbearers.

As Rio Barnett moved back along the

JIM HATFIELD

rear wall, his entrance noted by no one in the room, he could just make out the glint of lamplight on a sixgun muzzle which protruded slightly above the rim of the coffin's opened lid, level with Barnett's eyes.

This confirmed the grisly rumors the gunman had heard about Bullet Bob McTavish having been embalmed and laid

out with his old 44 Colt clutched in his hand. During the twenty-four hours Barnett had been in town, he had heard the more staid citizens of Frontera protest such a barbaric gesture as being undignified, if not outright blasphemous. But Coroner X. T. Keele had overruled all objections, reminding the town of the deceased oft-repeated request that he be buried with his boots on and a gun in his hand instead of the proverbial tissue paper lily . . .

Barnett fidgeted nervously, impatient for the eulogies to begin. The minister was nowhere in sight as yet; only X. T. Keele and the pallbearers waited at the bier.

Barnett was in town to handle a job, and he could not get started on his mission until he got a nod of permission from his employer, who was in this room, his identity known only to Barnett.

Outside, the windstorm, beginning to diminish in intensity, was droning a mournful dirge along the eaves of the deadfall. A loose shingle on the ridgepole caught the wind with a whine like a vibrating clarinet reed, like a soul in torment.

Barnett, having never seen the noted Bob McTavish in life, raised himself on tiptoes in hopes of glimpsing the old marshal's corpse, but this privilege would be denied him. At the moment when the mourners would be filing up onto the stage for their last look at old McTavish's remains, Barnett would be secreting his hold-up loot, if all went well. And it would, it had to.

A local housewife standing in the shadows nearby was whispering to an out-of-town visitor, identifying some of the pallbearers: "The man in the clawhammer coat, the blond-headed one, is our Wells Fargo agent, Hal Cavendall. He's fixin' to marry Trixie Rockford, the postmaster's daughter. And the tall one next to him, wearing the Texas Ranger badge, he quit an important case he was working on to come here and help bury old Bob. The most famous man in Texas, some say—Ranger Jim Hatfield."

CHAPTER II

Disaster Strikes

RIO BARNETT felt his neck hairs bristle to the cold sweep of shock which the name Jim Hatfield brought to him. To an owlhooter, Hatfield was the most-feared name in the Lone Star State.

And there he was, standing with bowed head and folded arms to one side of the stage with the other pallbearers. The lawman was nicknamed the Lone Wolf, for his single-handed exploits in bringing law and order to the wildest corners of the Texas frontier.

Barnett stared in fascination. Hatfield was a rugged man, over six feet in height, dressed as an ordinary cowpuncher would dress: bullhide chaps flaring from saddle-bowed legs, a blue workshirt, a loosely-knotted bandanna at his throat. Twin shell belts sagged to the weight of his famous bone-handled Peacemaker .45s. The circle-enclosed silver star badge of the Rangers was pinned to his shirt front. A black-haired, dark-eyed, weather-browned man of indeterminant age, he could be anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five.

Barnett heard the woman whisper, "There's the parson now."

An expectant, reverent hush fell over the crowded dancehall as Frontera's skypilot, the Reverend Bill Helmbold, stepped from the wings to join coroner X. T. Keele on stage. The parson looked even more dolorous than the occasion warranted, for he had had a difficult time deciding with his conscience the necessity of setting foot inside a honkytonk he had so often condemned as a sinkhole of iniquity.

Rev. Helmbold muttered something to Keele, who stepped forward and held up his hands for silence. Keele was a chunky-built man with porcine jowls and squinty, fat-lided eyes; for this occasion he was decked out in his somber black undertaker's garb.

"Ladies and gents," X. T. Keele began in funeral tones, "the main requiem oration will be given by our pastor Bill Helmbold here. But as one of the late lamented marshal's oldest and most intimate friends, I would beg your indulgence to speak a few words in tribute to the memory of one of the greatest lawmen Texas ever knew."

Rio Barnett began edging toward the vestibule doors. He had caught the cue his confederate had coached him to look for. And now he knew the expected $50,000 shipment had reached Frontera as expected, that their hold-up scheme could get under way.

X. T. Keele's sonorous oratory filled Barnett's ears: "I am recalling the time I was running the grocery store and it burned down. You folks have thought all these years it was the bank that loaned me the money to rebuild, but it wasn't. It was Robert Bruce McTavish who come to me on the sly and loaned me that money, folks. He made me promise not to let anybody know he was my benefactor. That is the kind of square-shooter we are burying today, and who knows how many others in this room were beneficaries of his generosity?"

Rio Barnett eased through the vestibule doors without anyone paying him notice. The outer doors were kept closed, to shut out the distracting noises and drafts of the storm outside. Barnett waited until a particularly violent wind-gust shook the saloon, causing the wall lamps to flicked momentarily. He chose that moment to slip out onto the porch, confident that no one attending the funeral had been aware of either his arrival or departure from the Alamo

His only reason for going inside at all was to get the nod from his accomplice, as they had arranged previously, that the Fort Presido package had indeed reached Frontera on the midnight stage. He had gotten that nod. The rest was up to him.

The gunman from El Paso had his quick look up and down the street. It was as totally deserted of men and horses as it had been when he had crossed over from the hotel; no late-comers were in sight, hurrying to the funeral. Frontera was a ghost town, and would be until Marshal Bullet Bob's coffin had been lowered into its waiting grave on Boothill, later this afternoon.

Barnett headed down the saloon steps and turned left on the spur-scuffed plank sidewalk. He was slightly built, rawhide thin, ginger brown, a man in his late thirties who wore the nondescript denim jumper, shirt, waist overalls and star boots of an ordinary saddle tramp. This anonymity of dress was carefully studied by men in Rio Barnett's profession; such drab garb was hard to describe in case witnesses spotted him committing a crime. But there would be no witnesses today

He adjusted the weight of his holstered gun and, head bent against the grit-laden drive of the wind, passed the board-up facade of the Pioneer Grocery to reach the squat brick building which was tacked onto the stage shed and haybarn—the Frontera office of the Wells Fargo line running between Pecos and El Paso.

Barnett paused to adjust the bandanna mask over his nose, knotting it carefully. He was remembering his confederate's last-minute instructions before they parted last night:

"It's impossible to say whether Luke Seebright will be in the Wells Fargo office when you show up. I'll do everything possible to see that he attends the funeral."

LUKE SEEBRIGHT was the combination bookkeeper and hostler for Wells Fargo here in town. Ordinarily, Seebright would have locked up the office and attended the funeral, seeing as how his boss, Hal Cavendall, was one of the pallbearers; but an incoming stage was due from Marfa at the same time as the funeral, and that complicated things. Barnett had no way of knowing what Seebright had intended to do about the matter, but it didn't matter anyhow.

Another glance up and down the street told the outlaw that he was alone here. The distraction of the old marshal's fun-

eral had been the key strategy of this whole plan which had brought him from El Paso yesterday.

A light gleamed inside the Wells Fargo office, but peering through the window in passing, Barnett saw no sign of Luke Seebright there. He paused to loosen the two Colts in their scabbards as he reached the doorstep.

Making sure his mask was in place, Barnett opened the door and stepped quickly inside, slamming the door shut silently as the incoming air threatened to blow out the wall lamp.

Barnett glanced quickly around, gun half out of holster. His slitted eyes between hatbrim and bandanna mask photographed every detail of the cubbyhole office. Agent Hal Cavendall was a meticulous man and his rolltop desk was in neat order, with separate baskets for waybills, unopened mail, and miscellaneous papers. A framed photograph of a beautiful young woman occupied a prominent spot on the desk, reminding the outlaw that the Wells Fargo agent was marrying the postmaster's daughter as soon as he completed a fancy new home for his bride on the outskirts of town.

To one side of a potbelly stove, which puffed out powdery white ash from the firebox grating whenever the wind gusts rattled the stovepipe damper, Barnett saw the door which led to the adjoining stagecoach shed and the stables out back.

Barnett stepped over to that door and looked out. He could hear a man working with a barn scoop, cleaning a stall. That, he knew, would be Cavendall's hostler and bookkeeper, Luke Seebright, and he was at the far end of the barn.

The coast was clear; if Seebright had been working on the books there would have been some messy unpleasantness to attend to, but now there was no need for that.

The gunman from El Paso turned his attention to the squat iron safe under the front window. It had been through a fire some time in the past and had been repainted over the name of the former owner of the safe, PIONEER GROCERY.

Barnett bolted the street door to make sure no random passerby dropped in while he was at work. Then, hunkering down before the safe, Barnett tried the door handle first. From previous experience, he always did that. Sometimes, thieves had been known to irreparably jam the door of an unlocked safe in their efforts to dynamite it open, when a mere twist of the handle would have done the trick.

But agent Hal Cavendall was a methodical man. He had locked the safe before leaving for the McTavish funeral up the street

Rio Barnett grinned. It doesn't matter he thought. He had come prepared.

Rummaging inside the snakeskin band of his stetson, the gunman drew out a folded slip of paper, covered with printed numerals in bright green ink. It was the July page from the calendar in Barnett's room over at the Oasis Hotel, and on the back of it, Barnett had copied down, from his confederate's dictation, a cryptic series of letters and numbers:

L 78—R 18—L 23—R 87—L 85—R 3 to open.

Kneeling before the safe, Barnett laid the paper on the rubber spittoon mat at his side and, referring to the figures on the paper, began turning the combination dial while he mumbled aloud the instructions: "Left 78, Right 18, Left 23—"

A moment later he heard sweet music: tumblers clicking out of their sockets. He turned the heavy handle and pulled. The ten-inch-thick laminated steel door swung open to reveal the array of black steel drawers and shelves inside.

Ignoring a drawer marked *Cash*, Barnett's trembling hands went straight to the brown paper-wrapped package which he had been coached to find. It had arrived on last night's stage from El Paso and was sealed with globs of wax. It was addressed·

Paymaster, Fort Presidio, Texas
Via Wells Fargo Express, Frontera

Barnett's temples ached to the accelerated pounding of his heart. This *had* been easy! He hefted the package. It was about the size and thicknes of a two-pound but-

termold. Barnett knew that it contained five hundred $100 yellowback bills from the United States Army Finance Department, Fort Bliss. Fifty thousand dollars to meet a payroll for the garrison at Fort Presido, the military reservation on the Rio Grande a day's ride south.

"HEY! What in hell are you doin'?" The man's shout lifted the hair on Barnett's scalp as the El Paso outlaw bounded to his feet and spun around.

A man in bib overalls, with manure-crusted boots and a barn shovel in his hand, was coming in the doorway from the rear of the building. The storm's noise had covered the sound of the door's opening. This, Barnett knew, was Cavendall's hostler, Luke Seebright.

Barnett dropped the package of Army currency to go for his Colt, but Seebright was too fast for him. Screaming like a Commanche, the hostler made a headlong dive which knocked Barnett off his feet before his gun was half out of leather.

Seebright landed on top of Barnett. His clubbing fist smashed the bandanna-masked jaw a glancing blow which did no damage. For a moment the two rolled over and over across the floor, to crash into the sandbox under the potbelly stove.

Cloth ripped loudly as Seebright, losing his grip on the gunman's arm, tried to get hold of Barnett's hip pocket and tore it out, rivets and all, from the rest of the garment.

Locked in a grapple, Barnett knew Seebright's weight and brawn had him doomed if he didn't use his gun, and soon.

With superhuman effort the masked man wrenched his left-hand Colt from scabbard and thrust the muzzle against Luke Seebright's neck. He tripped the hammer. Blood and gunsmoke blended as Seebright collapsed, killed instantly. Barnett pulled himself to his feet and raced across the room to snatch up the packet of currency, terror burning like acid in him.

He was fumbling with the bolt on the street door when a noise behind him made him turn, a vast panic icing his veins. He lifted his gun, and then held the trigger as if paralyzed.

A girl stood in the doorway leading to the stage barn: a girl in riding costume, white stetson and fringed buckskin jacket and split whipcord skirt. She held a quirt in one hand; coils of copper hair spilled shoulder-long under the Stetson, and her blue eyes were now swiveling between Seebright's corpse and the masked killer across the room.

Barnett broke the shackles of fear which paralyzed him. He jerked open the door and leaped outside, his malevolent brain in total confusion now. As long as things worked out according to plan, Barnett's nerves could be icy, rock-steady. But plans were shot to hell now, and he did not know where to turn.

He was supposed to secrete his package of loot in a certain designated oat box in a manger at the Guadalupe Livery, where his confederate would pick it up later. Now that was impossible; not only had he murdered a man who had caught him red-handed in the act of robbing the Wells Fargo vault, but that murder might have been witnessed by the girl.

In blind panic, Barnett headed up-street intending to duck into the nearest alley. He flung a glance over his shoulder and saw the girl in the white stetson running out of the Wells Fargo office behind him; the faint echo of her scream reached his ears above the howl of the sandstorm.

He clawed the sixgun from holster and whirled like a lion at bay. Let that girl come a dozen steps closer, he told himself, and he would gun her down.

Then, through the shifting screen of storm-blown dust, Barnett saw that the girl had armed herself with a rifle as she passed the Wells Fargo gun rack—and at this moment was diving behind a wooden pillar which supported the sagging porch awning of the Pioneer Grocery.

In that instant, Barnett realized who she was. The subject of the photograph on Cavendall's desk. The girl who would be marrying the Wells Fargo agent when they got their home built.

Suddenly the girl's rifle muzzle showed

around the wooden column and flame spat from the bore. The slug missed Barnett but was close enough to pluck a slot through the flapping hem of his bandanna mask. That kind of shooting was enough to completely demoralize the El Paso roughneck.

Thumbing a shot at the girl to keep her under cover, Barnett turned and fled up-street in wild panic. He was racing alongside the Alamo dance hall when disaster threatened ahead of him: a tall man with a tin star on his coat lapel was coming down the steps of the jail office next door to investigate the sound of gunfire outside.

Barnett skidded to a halt. He was boxed in, trapped. If he attempted to run across the street either the girl or the jailer would drop him with a bullet.

There was but one recourse left. The door of the dance hall was at his elbow. If he could lose himself in the darkness, mingle with the funeral crowd, he might have a chance

Clutching his package of loot tight against his ribs, Rio Barnett jerked open the dance hall door and vanished inside He had escaped—but he had also bottled himself up in a trap as tight as Bob McTavish's coffin.

CHAPTER III

The Search

TEXAS RANGER Jim Hatfield stood with the other pallbearers at the right proscenium of the dance hall stage, head bowed and eyes closed. The local parson was praying, and had been praying for the past several minutes.

Hatfield was a reverent man. He had brushed shoulders with sudden death too often not to give considerable thought to anternity and religion—but he was having trouble keeping his mind on the Frontera skypilot's sonorous words. Rev. Helmbold was directing his flowery phrases not so much to the Diety in whose keeping he was soon to consign the mortal shell of the late Marshal McTavish, as he was to the assembled multitude filling the dance-hall floor below: cattlemen, townspeople, soldiers, freighters.

Another reason for the Lone Wolf Ranger's wandering attention was the feeling that he had heard gunfire outside, muffled and muted by the roar of the windstorm. And unexplained gunfire was to a Texas Ranger the same as a bugle to an old soldier.

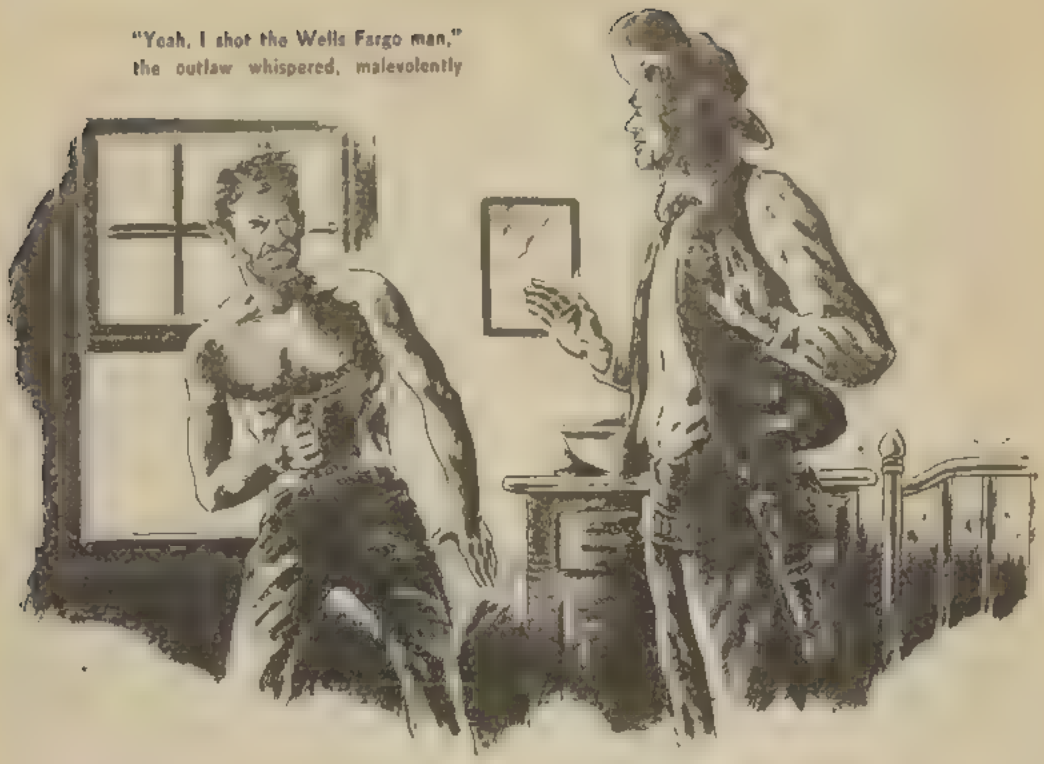
Hatfield had traveled overland on horseback from Eagle Pass to reach Frontera in time to participate in the final rites for Bullet Bob McTavish. On more than one occasion in the past, Hatfield had fought alongside the grizzeld old marshal, and while he recalled McTavish as a dour old Scot without a streak of sentiment showing on the surface, Hatfield had long ago promised McTavish that, when the old man's time came, he would represent the Texas Ranger organization at McTavish's graveside rites.

Above the droning of the preacher's voice, Hatfield heard the street door of the Alamo Saloon open on a pinched-off swell of sound from the storm outside. He opened his eyes and lifted his head, but the glare of the footlights and the darkness of the dance hall prevented him from seeing the furtive figure of a late-comer slipping into the crowd.

Not more than a minute later, the doors opened again—and this time, Hatfield saw who entered. A man and a girl, the former a deputy sheriff to whom Hatfield had been introduced yesterday, Amos Hardcastle by name, who served as the town jailer. The young woman, Hatfield was startled to see, was the girl Cavendall had introduced as his fiancee; it was odd that she should be late for the funeral

Hatfield glanced around at the other men on the stage, wondering if they had heard the brief crackle of gunfire too.

Apparantly not, he decided. The man next to him, Hal Cavendall, was staring fixedly at the coffin. The coroner, X. T. Keele, had his gaze riveted to the back



"Yeah, I shot the Wells Fargo man," the outlaw whispered, malevolently

of Rev. Helmbold's neck as the skypilot implored heaven's mercy on the sinner soon to knock on the Pearly Gates.

Beyond Keele was the green young deputy who had been left to fill Bob McTavish's boots as Frontera's law officer—Del Oakhurst. If Oakhurst had heard the gunshots, he showed no sign of concern

Suddenly the preacher was rudely interrupted by a shout from the rear of the dance hall: "Hey, let Trixie through, folks. There's been a murder committed at the express office just now and Trixie's got to report it to Del Oakhurst. Let her through!"

Alongside Hatfield, Wells Fargo agent Hal Cavendall turned chalk-pale. In the ensuing shocked hush, the Ranger heard Cavendall's choked gasp: "Murder—at my office? Oh no!"

The shout, Jim Hatfield now realized, had come from jailer Amos Hardcastle, who was now standing guard at the rear door.

Marshal Oakhurst moved to the front center of the stage as a red-headed girl in a white stetson, dressed in riding clothes, worked her way through the shocked crowd to reach the front of the hall.

Trixie Rockford, her name was; Jim Hatfield had met her as he was riding into Frontera yesterday, standing with Hal Cavendall inspecting their half-completed dream house on the El Paso road.

Coroner X. T. Keele and the marshal gave Trixie a hand to lift her over the footlights onto the stage. Hal Cavendall crowded over to listen as the girl poured out her story of what had happened.

Hatfield was burning with curiosity to join them, but refrained from doing so. He was a visitor here, and would not enter the case until asked to do so.

Suddenly Marshal Oakhurst turned and beckoned to Hatfield

"This is a damned serious thing, Jim—quite apart from the fact Hal's swamper has just been murdered and the safe robbed. Trixie says the killer ducked

into this dance hall on his getaway—and is still hiding in the crowd!"

Joining the group crowded around Trixie, Jim Hatfield looked very sober. "That's bad marshal. Folks could get trampled to death if a crowd stampeded. What happened?"

Oakhurst turned back to Trixie, who stood in the embrace of Hal Cavendall's protective arm. Below them, the crowd waited in hushed silence, knowing some disaster had occurred to interrupt the funeral. Hardcastle had already spilled the beans on that score.

"You've met Ranger Hatfield, Trixie," Oakhurst said. "Tell him what you saw and heard at the stage office."

TRIXIE, her voice shaking with nervousness, plunged into the retelling of her ordeal for the Ranger's benefit:

"I had just returned to town from a horseback ride out to the Diamond X ranch on the Marfa road, taking some medicine out to the foreman's wife and her new baby. I keep my horse in the Wells Fargo barn, and Luke Seebright, the hostler, was going to curry and grain my pony when Luke said he thought he heard something or somebody in the front office.

"I was heading out the street door of the stage shed," the girl continued, "when I heard Luke yell something, and then I heard a shot. I rushed over to the inner door of the office just in time to see a masked man bending over Luke, a smoking gun in his hand. Luke had been shot at very close range."

Hal Cavendall hugged the girl closer. "We're lucky he didn't turn the gun on you, darling."

"Anyway, the man turned and ran when he saw me," Trixie went on. "He snatched something off the floor in front of the safe and he didn't waste any time getting out the door. I grabbed a Winchester from Hal's rack and took out after him."

"You were foolish to do that, Trixie," Oakhurst muttered.

"I know. I jumped onto the porch of the Pioneer Grocery and fired one shot at the man, and he fired back."

Hatfield nodded. He hadn't just imagined those shots, then.

"Just then I saw Amos Hardcastle come jumping out of the jail office, right in front of this masked man. The killer saw he was boxed in, so he turned and jumped through the door into this dance hall, carrying his loot with him, I'm dead sure of that."

"What kind of loot?" Hatfield asked

"Luke must have caught him robbing Hal's safe. The door was wide open—the vault door, that is—and this masked man made off with a parcel wrapped in brown paper. I saw him snatch it up and run with it, and he had it in his hand when he ducked into this dance hall. Amos Hardcastle can confirm that."

Jim Hatfield stared off across the puzzled, shifting crowd, relieved to see that Deputy Hardcastle had stationed himself at the only exit from the hall available to the unknown killer in their midst. The other door, leading to the barroom, was locked

"I remember seeing someone come in, just before you and Hardcastle entered," the Lone wolf said. "Our work seems cut out for us. Trixie will have to identify the killer."

The girl shook her head. "I doubt if I can. He wore a mask, and his colthes were so ordinary—blue jumper, overalls, battered stetson—that he looks like a hundred other men."

Oakhurst said nervously, "What can I do, Jim? Reckon I'm the man responsible here. I don't want to corner a desperate man in a room as crowded as this one—if lead started to fly innocent people might die. You've had lots of experience Jim. And you got jurisdiction here. Will you help?"

Hatfield nodded. They had a problem. The green and inexperienced young lawman was in need of the help of the Texas Ranger.

Hatfield stepped to the front of the stage and lifted his hands. He was awarded the crowd's breath-held attention.

"Friends, a masked killer gunned down Luke Seebright at the Wells Fargo office a few minutes ago," the Lone Wolf called out. "He ducked into this dance hall to seek safety in a crowd. Deputy Hardcastle is stationed at the door to see that no one comes in or leaves this room. My advice would be for the guilty man to give himself up. He can't get away."

A stunned silence filled the room. No one moved; no one spoke.

Hatfield, palm riding his gun, peered out through the murk at the dance hall crowd. Every other man he saw seemed to match Trixie's sketchy description of Seebright's murderer.

He heard Oakhurst ask Cavendall, "Do you have any idea what was in the brown package this hombre choused from your safe, Hal?"

Cavendall looked sick. "I figure it's a payroll consigned to Fort Presido, down on the Rio Grande. Army notified me by wire two weeks ago that their paymaster would be a couple days late picking it up and for me to hold it. It came in on last night's stage from Paso. Fifty thousand in paper money—and Wells Fargo is responsible for the last penny of it in case of theft, as long as it was in our hands."

Jim Hatfield inquired sharply. "You deposited fifty thousand dollars in your safe and left it *unlocked*, Mr. Cavendall?"

THE Wells Fargo agent said numbly, "Looks as if I must have left it unlocked, Hatfield, from what Trixie says."

The girl clung to her fiance, misery in her eyes. "But maybe Luke opened it for the robber—at gun point."

Cavendall shook his head. "Nobody but me knew the combination to that safe, honey. I was careful to memorize it, never put it on paper. Old Lige Hawkins taught me the combination the day I bought the safe from him. I never confided it to Luke."

Hatfield said, "Lige Hawkins? Who's he?"

"Used to own the Pioneer Grocery. Went broke so I bought the safe from him."

"Maybe this Lige Hawkins—"

"No, Hatfield. Hawkins has been dead five years now."

Hatfield turned for another look at the crowd, numbering over two hundred. One of them—and a good third of them strangers in town—was the slayer. But whether he could be identified was a question.

Hatfield felt a hand on his arm. He turned to see Del Oakhurst close at his side. "Jim," the deputy whispered "will you take charge. I'm just a maverick, a rookie. You've had experience, I really don't know where to begin."

The Ranger nodded. "Okay, Dell. Suppose you hustle over to the express office and guard the open safe. Meanwhile I'll see whether Trixie can identify—"

"Hold on, Ranger!" Hal Cavendall burst in. "Trixie's life's in danger, her being an eye witness to a murder and all. How are you going to protect her? That murderer is armed."

X. T. Keele said, "I better go with Oakhurst and take charge of Seebright's body. I'm the deputy coroner here."

The Lone Wolf shook his head. "I'm going to need your help, sir. Here's my plan. In order to protect the crowd, as well as Trixie, I'm going to have every person in this room line up and file up those stairs onto the stage. At the foot of the stairs, X. T. Keele will collect the firearms each man is packing. At the top of the stairs, Cavendall can frisk each person in turn to see if they're carrying that Wells Fargo package. Then they will pass in front of Trixie, who will try and identify the killer. The line-up will pass by McTavish's coffin, so they can pay their last respects to him on their way out the back stage door, where I will be stationed."

The men nodded, agreeing to Hatfield's plan. "Seems as safe as possible—and as certain," X. T. Keele said.

After Oakhurst had left by the alley door, Hatfield stepped to the footlights and explained his plan to the crowd who seemed to accept the situation without complaint.

"We only want one man," Jim said winding up, "and we'll keep the line moving as rapidly as possible until the guilty man has been spotted. If he will take my advice he'd give himself up here and now. Whoever you are, you haven't got a chance. We know you're inside this dance hall and we know there is no way you could have gotten out. So how about surrendering here and now and throwing yourself on the mercy of a judge and jury later?"

No sound save the rattle of wind-driven sand on the roof broke the pregnant hush which followed Hatfield's words. Luke Seebright, the Wells Fargo stocktender, had been a well-liked figure in Frontera life and his killer probably knew a public confession of guilt would precipitate a lynching that would be beyond Jim Hatfield's power to break up.

"'*Sta bueno*, then," Hatfield called out, gesturing toward a flight of steps leading up to the left side of the stage. "We're asking each of you to surrender your firearms as you come up those steps. Mr. X. T. Keele will keep them in custody and you can recover your property later on this afternoon. The quicker you cooperate with us the sooner we can bring the guilty man to bay and get on with Marshal McTavish's funeral."

Thus began the man-by-man search of the Alamo throng which, funeral manager X. T. Keele finally realized would make this occasion memorable as long as Texas existed. A funeral interrupted while the law attempted to locate a killer who had committed his crime while the funeral itself was in progress!

At the far edge of the stage, X. T. Keele stood beside a large open packing case at the top of the stairsteps, accepting sixguns, knives and shell belts from each mourner in the line. Thus divested of lethal weapons, the individual would submit to a quick but thorough search for the missing Wells Fargo package by agent Hal Cavendall. While the search was going on, Trixie had her opportunity to size up the person involved. Each time she shook her head and said—"He's not the one," Hal Cavendall would signal the man to cross to the rear of the stage where Ranger Jim Hatfield stood guard at a door which opened on a back alley.

MAN by man, at a rate of four per minute, they went through the swift-moving line—up the steps, past X. T. Keele's depository for firearms, over to Cavendall's searching hands, past Trixie Rockford's searching eyes, across the stage and out into the alley, past the watchful eye of the Lone Wolf Ranger

Finally the pallbearers on stage, forming a guard of honor for McTavish's coffin, requested permission to get outside and get some fresh air. Absurd as it was, Cavendall insisted on searching each pallbearer before permitting these obviously innocent bystanders to leave the building, along with the parson.

An hour later, when Trixie had yet to register even a doubtful decision and the crowd on the barroom floor had thinned to the final fifty, Jim Hatfield began to have a desperate feeling build up inside him. Were they going to fail?

As Trixie had been moved to comment, half-way through the line-up! "They all look alike. I've seen so many blue shirts and blue overalls that I'm dizzy. Luke's killer could have passed through the line and I wouldn't even know it."

At four o'clock, with the end of the line in sight, the Ranger took over the search for concealed loot in order to allow Cavendall to get back to the Wells Fargo office, where a stage from Marfa was due.

"Just to shut off any possible gossip, in case the guilty one has slipped through our sieve," Hatfield said to Cavendall, "maybe I'd better search you too, sir."

Cavendall bristled. "Are you implying I would rob the company I work for?"

"The guilty man could have slipped you the parcel while you were searching him, Hal!" X. T. Keele called out. "If you got nothing to hide, why make a fuss?"

Hatfield finished his quick frisking of the Wells Fargo agent's person. "You're clean." He grinned. "Next!"

A half hour later, the last of McTavish's

mourners filed past the bier and stepped out into the alley to join the swelling crowd outside. The sandstorm, Jim Hatfield noticed, had blown itself out as suddenly as it had come and the Texas sun was pouring down on the town as if the storm had never been

Left on stage now were Trixie, X. T Keele and Hatfield; deputy sheriff Amos Hardcastle the fourth person left inside the dancehall, remained on guard duty at the outer door. At the top of the stage stairs was X. T. Keele's box filled with a vast assortment of sixguns, derringers, knives and blackjacks which he had taken from the crowd for Trixie's protection.

"Well," Hatfield said heavily, "it looks like Seebright's killer slipped out of our loop. Don't blame yourself, Trixie."

Trixie's eyes burst into tears. "It got so they all looked alike," she said, "and the killer got away so fast—I was so frightened, seeing Luke dead on the floor —why, I can't even recall whether his mask was a red bandanna or a blue one, I'm so confused."

Jim Hatfield peered out over the empty dancehall. "Well," he said, "we know that $50,000 package of greenbacks wasn't slipped out of here under our noses. It's hidden somewhere in this room. At least Cavendall's company won't have to make that loss good."

CHAPTER IV

A Dead Man's Clue

DESCENDING the stage stairs to the floor below, Jim Hatfield would have been willing to wager a year's salary that he would have the missing loot in his possession inside of a ten minute's search. The Alamo dancehall annex was as bare of hiding places as any room could possibly be.

The board and bat walls offered no cupboards, niches, or shelves of any kind where the killer could have stowed a brown paper parcel. The floor did not even offer a knothole, let alone a trap door of any sort.

The sliding doors which connected with the gambling and barroom next door—the main portion of the saloon—were padlocked. There was no possible chance that the fugitive had slipped out that exit, even if he had had a key in his possession; the doors had been lined with people.

Hardcastle had been on guard duty at the street door almost within moments of the time the killer had entered the room —and Trixie Rockford assured the Ranger that the deputy sheriff was a trustworthy man; the culprit could not have slipped the loot to him.

After making his way completely around the room, carrying a lamp into the dark corners to make sure he overlooked no possible hiding place, Jim Hatfield had found nothing whatsoever of the missing brown package. Two more circuits of the dancehall yielded zero results, and Hatfield began to feel a trifle panicky.

Carrying his search to the point of absurdity, Hatfield brought a folding ladder from the stage and climbed up to check the three crystal chandeliers hanging from the rafters. "Just in case the killer tossed the bundle of loot into the air and was lucky enough to lodge it in a chandelier," Hatfield explained.

But he found nothing.

Outside the saloon, the throng of townsmen and visitors had gathered, somber faced, to smoke or talk together in clotted groups here and there along the saloon wall. Emotions had been keyed up by the funeral orations, for Robert Bruce McTavish's life had, directly or indirectly, crossed the lives of all these people. Sentiment concerning the dead marshal could not help but be strong, either loving or hating Bullet Bob's memory; there was no middle way, no lukewarm attitude possible.

While Hatfield was continuing his meticulous search for the missing package, fists pounded on the front door and Deputy Hardcastle conferred for a moment through the panels before reporting

to Hatfield: "Barney Koontz, he owns the place. Wants to know if the funeral's postponed until tomorrow or somethin'."

Hatfield realized, with a guilty start, that he was taking over authority here which rightfully belonged to young Oakhurst, but the boy needed help.

"Tell him," the Lone Wolf said, "that I'll be allowing the coffin to be taken out to the hearse shortly."

The news was received outside with a brief cheer. Barney Koontz, however, pounded on the doors again. This time Hardcastle had a different request to pass on to the Texas Ranger: "Koontz is losin' business. Wants to know when he can reopen the place."

Hatfield snapped, "Not until I've found that package of dinero, damn it. It's bad enough that the killer escaped because it was impossible for Miss Trixie to identify him, but we're positive of one thing—he didn't leave this building with that Wells Fargo loot on him."

Koontz's bull-toned roar reached Hatfield direct this time: "The men want to know how long you're goin' to impound their shootin' irons'"

From the stage, X. T. Keele, standing there with Trixie, called wearily, "It isn't fitting, Mr. Hatfield, holding up the funeral this way. Can't the pallbearers come in and carry the coffin out, so the graveyard services can proceed? Lots of riders in from outlying ranches and such have to be hittin' the trail home."

Hatfield returned the smoky oil lamp to its bracket and pressed his hands against throbbing temples. Everyone was at him at once, from all sides, and he was getting nowhere in his hunt. Not only had a murderer passed within touching distance of him, leaving the Alamo Saloon this afternoon, but that murderer had, up to now, succesfully outwitted him in finding a hiding place for his booty.

To Deputy Hardcastle, Hatfield barked the answer to the saloon owner's question: "The people will get their guns back immediately after the burial services at Boothill. That'll give me time to check through that box of hoglogs, to make sure the package of loot wasn't sneaked into the packing case unawares."

Hatfield went back down the length of the barroom and mounted to the stage to face X. T. Keele and the girl.

"This may shock your sensibilities, ma'am," the Lone Wolf Ranger apologized to Trixie Rockford, "but I'm going to search the coffin, and my friend McTavish's corpse."

X. T Keele's florid countenance went pale with anger.

"Isn't that carrying things too far, Ranger Hatfield? Of all the persons under this roof, I'd say the late Marshal McTavish was the one we can assume was innocent of that murder!"

"Don't forget that the procession filed past the coffin," he reminded Keele. "It's barely possible that Cavendall could have missed finding the package and the guilty man could have slipped it inside the casket. I'm overlooking no possibilities, no matter how fantastic or far-fetched they may seem."

JIM HATFIELD walked over to the coffin and raised the lower half of the gleaming hardwood lid, exposing the dead marshal's entire length reposing on a cushion of quilted white satin.

Lamplight gleamed from the furbished silver star pinned to Bullet Bob's lapel, the badge he had worn with such high honor across the long years. One gnarled hand held the cedar-butted .44 Colt which had helped write some of the stormier chapters of West Texas' history. And McTavish was wearing his boots, even if he hadn't died in them.

It was a grisly task, but Hatfield made sure the $50,000 parcel had not been slipped under the dead man's coat or behind the lining of the coffin.

Finally he turned to Keele. "You can officially close the coffin now," he told the coroner. "I'll call in the pallbearers and the funeral can proceed. At least I made certain the Wells Fargo loot didn't leave this dancehall by way of Bob's casket."

X. T. Keele nodded glumly and proceeded to lower the two half-lids of the

coffin, as Jim Hatfield walked over to the stage door and called in the pallbearers. They entered in time to see X. T. Keele, with hammer and coffin nails, closing McTavish's coffin.

When the pallbearers took their positions at the coffin handles, only four of the six were present, the absentees being Hal Cavendall, who had returned to the stage office, and Hatfield.

"Ranger Hatfield, we are waiting," X. T. Keele called from the center of the stage where the four pallbearers stood bracketing the coffin. "You are one of the pallbearers, or had you forgotten?"

Hatfield shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I am going to remain here in the Alamo Saloon with Deputy Hardcastle while the funeral services shift to the graveyard. I hope to have that package located by the time the services are over."

X. T. Keele scowled, then walked over to take his grip on the coffin handle intended for Hatfield. Muttering an order to the pallbearers, the telegraph operator helped lift McTavish's coffin off the sawhorse supports and head toward the door. Outside, Hatfield could see a horse-drawn hearse, black-plumed and glass-walled, backing into the alley to receive the coffin. The bare-headed crowd stood by, out in the street.

As the pallbearers passed him, Hatfield reached out to touch X. T. Keele's sleeve.

"Drop out, please," the Lone Wolf whispered. "The four pallbearers can manage, I think."

Blinking puzzledly, X. T. Keele let go his grip on one of the silver coffin handles and stepped back, staring after the others as they carried the hardwood box out to the waiting hearse. Then Keele turned inquiringly to Hatfield.

"I'm supposed to be in charge of the funeral," he said indignantly. "You aren't going to keep me here with you?"

Hatfield shook his head. "You are the only person who hasn't been searched," he said. "As a matter of form, I've got to clear you. Just in case the killer reversed a master pickpocket's job on you by slipping something *into* your pocket instead of taking something out."

Keele fumed an oath under his breath but made no attempt to resist Hatfield's examination of his pockets and person. After satisfying himself that the portly telegraph operator was smuggling nothing on his person—either purposely or unbeknown to himself—the Lone Wolf gestured toward the door through which they could see the coffin being slid onto the bed of the hearse's wagon box. Beyond the black-plumed team of matched black horses, the impatient crowd was waiting to follow the hearse to Frontera's boothill graveyard.

As X. T. Keele hurried out to take charge once more Hatfield closed the door and turned to Trixie.

"You're free to leave, Trixie," he said wearily.

The girl's shoulders lifted and fell. "I hadn't planned on going to Bob McTavish's funeral anyway," she said. "I hate funerals. And that doesn't imply any lack of respect for Mr. McTavish. I worshipped him. Everyone did—except the tinhorn gamblers and the gunhawks and the dancehall girls."

Hatfield regarded the lovely girl before him for a long moment before he finally spoke. "Trixie, think hard. Are you absolutely *positive* that killer was carrying that package when he came through the Alamo doorway?"

Trixie pressed one hand to her heart and raised the other as if taking an oath.

"I saw him clutching that parcel under his arm when he disappeared through the door. I'd swear to that in any court."

Hatfield pulled in a long, heavy breath and slowly exhaled it.

"This has got me buffaloed," he said. "You saw the extremes I went to, searching everyone in the room, every conceivable spot, high or low, that the fugitive could possibly have reached. The only spot left to search is that box of guns X. T. Keele collected from the citizenry, and I don't expect to find the parcel in there."

Trixie fought hard to control herself.

"We've *got* to recover that stolen parcel, Jim," she choked out. "If we don't, Hal will lose his job with Wells Fargo—they'll never believe he locked up that safe. And if that happens, we can't afford to get married, we can't even afford to finish building our new home."

Hatfield said consolingly, "We'll find it, Trixie, don't fret about that. Suppose you hustle over to the stage office and see if Del Oakhurst has turned up any clues. And you might ask your fiance to confirm that that army payroll package is actually missing. He only identified it by guesswork, you know."

IT WAS a pretext to get the girl out, leaving Hatfield the task of pawing through the packing box full of weapons which Keele had impounded. But the killer had not slipped his package of loot into that box. As Hatfield was returning the guns to the packing case, marshal Del Oakhurst came in the back way.

"Find any clues?" Hatfield greeted the young lawman.

Oakhurst was trembling with suppressed excitement. "Sure as hell did. Something Luke Seebright's got caught in his hand. I want you to come over and have a look for yourself, Jim. It might be the clue that could break this case."

"What is it?"

"I'd rather you see for yourself, see what you make of it."

"You haven't had the dead man removed from the Wells Fargo office, then. *Bueno.* I forgot to ask you to hold Seebright's remains there until I got a chance to visit the express office. I want you to know I don't mean to be giving you, the new marshal, orders. These are things I feel are important."

Oakhurst seemed flattered by the Ranger's deference to his authority. "I couldn't have moved the body anyway without the coroner's permission. And Keele's still busy with Bob's funeral."

Hatfield headed across the empty dance floor toward the street door where Deputy Hardcastle remained on vigil. As Oakhurst fell in step beside him, the Lone Wolf said worriedly, "I wish I could make up my mind about Hal Cavendall. He seems like a decent guy, but if he left that safe open, knowing what it contained—"

Oakhurst said, "The safe wasn't blown open or jimmied in any way, you'll see that. But he swears he locked it."

As if testing out the marshal's opinion of Cavendall, Hatfield went on, "He could have given the combination to an accomplice, with instructions to knock over the safe while the town was occupied with the McTavish funeral."

Oakhurst came to a dead halt, staring in amazement at the Ranger. "Are you trying to tell me that Hal Cavendall—do you suspect him of plotting the robbery?"

"I'm suspicious of everyone," Hatfield grumbled, "until this mystery is cleared up. Mr. Hardcastle," he said as they came to the deputy, "you won't mind if I check your person for that missing package? You're the only one who hasn't been searched."

Deputy Hardcastle grinned under his formidable mustache.

"For my own protection, I'd demand that I be searched, Ranger Hatfield," the deputy said. "It don't seem possible a package could vanish in the air. I almost wonder if Trixie was mistaken, sayin' the killer toted the package in here."

Hatfield paused in the act of frisking Hardcastle, his brows gathering into a knot.

"I thought you were closer to the killer, when he ducked through this doorway, than Trixie was?"

Hardcastle looked flustered. "I was, sure I was. But I wasn't payin' too much attention, what with the wind blowin' like fury. All I noticed for sure was that this hombre had a red bandanna over his face, and that didn't mean a thing, because hell, Jim—I had a bandanna over *my* face, too, to keep the damned dust out of my nose. I didn't know he was a fugitive when I seen him."

Hatfield grinned and slapped the deputy on the back. "No hard feelings," he said. "Just keep everybody out, Hardcastle, until I get back."

The Lone Wolf was glad to get back into the sunshine. The sidewalks were covered with a fine talcum of dust, laid there as the last flirting tail of the storm blew itself out, but the sky was enamel blue and the air was so still the two lawmen could hear voices lifted in singing *Rock of Ages* over at the boothill cemetery on the top of the hill overlooking Frontera to the south.

Young Oakhurst fell in step beside the Ranger as they headed toward the nearby stage office.

"Do you think Hardcastle can be trusted?" Hatfield asked.

Oakhurst said instantly, "Absolutely. I've known him all my life. Besides, we know *he* wasn't the one who killed Luke."

"I know," mumbled Hatfield, "but if the killer dropped his package in that dark vestibule, Hardcastle had the best chance of spotting it and maybe ducking outside for a minute and hiding it someplace."

Oakhurst grinned bleakly. "I'm new at this law game," he commented, "but I can see right now that in a murder case, a lawman can't trust *anybody*, can he?"

Hatfield smiled bleakly. "You're learning fast, son. I'm trying to remember whether Reverened Helmhold was searched before we let him leave. I don't even trust a preacher today."

They found Hal Cavendall busy in front of the stage office unhitching a team from the recently arrived Marfa stage, a job which ordinarily Luke Seebright would have been doing. Inside the office, Trixie Rockford was sitting at Cavendall's desk, her back turned to the dead man sprawled on the floor by the stove.

"You can leave now, Trixie," Oakhurst said. "That is, if it's all right with Ranger Hatfield."

Hatfield's attention was on the corpse of Luke Seebright, whose head was pillowed in a lake of congealed blood. "Of course. I'm terribly sorry you were put through this ordeal, ma'am."

Trixie got up and went through the door leading to the stable. She called back over her shoulder, "If you should need me for any reason at all, Mr. Hatfield, I'll be over at the postoffice helping Dad sort the mail off the Marfa stage."

"Thank you, Trixie."

HATFIELD hunkered down by the corpse, studying it with a professional detachment. Luke Seebright had been shot in the neck, at close range. The muzzle flame had set his collar afire but

A TALL TEXAS TALE

COLD CORPSE

A GRAVE digger was hard at work. As he shoveled each spadeful of dirt, he became more absorbed in his own thoughts and before he knew it, he had dug the grave so deep he couldn't get out. Came night and with the evening chill, his predicament became more and more uncomfortable. He shouted for help and at last attracted the attention of a drunk.

"Get me out of here," called the grave digger in a voice that quavered with that chill that shook him. "I'm cold."

The drunk looked in the grave and said, "Why, you poor thing. No wonder you're cold. They forgot to put any dirt on you."

—*E. J. Ritter, Jr.*

the blood had quickly extinguished it. The coroner would probably find the bullet lodged in the hostler's brain.

"Notice what Luke's got in his right hand?" Oakhurst asked eagerly.

Hatfield nodded. He had been studying that torn rectangle of blue denim for several moments now, clutched tightly in the dead man's right fist.

"If you had reported this to me sooner," the Ranger muttered, "We would have captured Seebright's killer. This is a scrap of denim torn from the killer's clothing, I would say."

Very gently, the Ranger began extricating the rectangle of blue denim from Seebright's stiffening grasp.

"I'll tell you why I didn't report to you sooner, Jim," the young lawman confessed. "When I got here, Luke was lying on his right arm, so I couldn't see his hand. I had a notion that nobody but the coroner could touch a murder victim, you know. Then I finally realized, hell, I'm a lawman, I got a right. So I searched his pockets, and pulled out his arm from under him, and saw that blue rag."

Hatfield was examining the cloth with minute care.

"You have nothing to apologize for," he said. "But I believe this is a patch pocket torn from a pair of overalls. As I reconstruct it, Seebright grappled with the safe robber, grabbed hold of his pocket, and ripped it loose from the copper rivets. While they were fighting, the robber shot Luke, not realizing the dead man had a clue clutched in his hand."

Oakhurst murmured lamely, "Like I said, the minute I discovered the clue, I raced over to tell you."

Hatfield folded the torn cloth and put it in his pocket for future reference.

"If I'd known this earlier I would have been on a watchout for a man with a pocket missing from his pants. This may still hang him, providing he's still around. But I'm afraid Seebright's killer may be long gone from this town by now."

Oakhurst said eagerly, "I'll go up to the graveyard and size up every hombre who leaves the funeral after the buryin'. If the killer attended the funeral in torn pants I can spot him for sure."

Jim Hatfield looked skeptical. "I'd say the odds were a thousand to one," he said, "but it won't hurt to try."

After Oakhurst had left the office on his way to boothill, Hatfield turned his attention to the Wells Fargo safe, glad for an opportunity to conduct his investigation on his own.

The safe was still wide open, exactly as it had been left by the murderer. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed.

Then a scrap of torn paper caught the Lone Wolf's attention. It was lying on a cuspidor mat just to the left of the safe.

He picked it up and examined it curiously, passing it off at the moment as a random scrap of paper. It had been torn off a calendar. Green numerals, he noted, were for the current month.

On the blank side of the paper someone had written, in a florid, curlycued hand, a series of cryptic numbers and letters:

L 78—R 18—L 23—R 87—L 85—R 3 to open.

Suddenly Hatfield's pulses speeded up. Could this be the combination to the Wells Fargo safe? There was only one way to find out. Hatfield closed the thick fireproof door and spun the combination dial to lock the tumblers. Then he began turning the dial to conform with the settings indicated on the mysterious slip of paper—left to 78, right to 18, finally winding up with the dial set on the numeral 3

"If my hunch is right, this door will open now," Hatfield said-aloud

His heart pounding with suspense, Hatfield tugged at the handle of the safe. The heavy fireproof steel door opened wide!

For a long moment Hatfield crouched there, trying to sort out his thoughts. Then, standing up, he stared for another long moment at the framed photograph of Trixie Rockford occupying an honored spot on Cavendall's desk. It went against his grain, bringing grief to a girl

as lovely and sincere as Trixie, but—

Stepping to the inner door of the office, he saw Cavendall hanging up harness inside the adjacent stage barn. At Hatfield's gesture, the Wells Fargo man stopped his work and came over to join the Ranger in the office.

"Find any of the answers, Ranger?" Cavendall asked. "I don't mind tellin' you, my life will be ruined if you don't clear this case before a Wells Fargo investigator comes down to check."

Hatfield pulled in a deep breath. "You're in trouble, Hal," he said grimly. "Trouble that might lead you to more than losing your job with Wells Fargo or postponing the building of a new home for the girl you hope to marry."

CHAPTER V

Arrest

CAVENDALL returned Hatfield's stare. "What kind of trouble, Ranger?"

Hatfield gestured toward the safe. "You told me over at the dancehall that you'd memorized the combination?"

Cavendall nodded vigorously. "That's right. I've never written it down, in case you think I lost it or something."

Hatfield reached in his pocket and brought out the calendar page, printed in bright green ink, with the cabalistic letters and figures penciled in a flourishy, flambuoyant hand on the back. He handed it to Cavendall, who studied it in stunned silence. Finally he looked up, panic in his eyes.

"This is the combination to my strongbox. Where'd *you* get it?"

"It was lying on the floor alongside the cuspidor. Where the robber laid it while he twirled the dial to open the safe."

The color receded from young Hal Cavendall's sun-bronzed face. Hatfield went on in a gentle voice: "That's a pretty fancy home you're building for Miss Trixie. Must have cost plenty."

Cavendall mumbled in a dazed monotone, "I grew up in a shack. Trixie's never had a nice place to live either. I vowed she'd have the biggest, nicest house in Frontera when we got married, by thunder."

Hatfield remained silent. He remained silent so long that Hal Cavendall suddenly read the grim significance of the Texas Ranger's level, accusing stare.

With a harsh cry, the Wells Fargo man fell back a step, hand brushing the butt of his gun.

"You're accusing me of handing that combination over to a robber, so as to get the money to pay off the mortgage on my home!" A wild note crept into Cavendall's voice. "You're thinkin' maybe I had something to do with Luke's death?"

Hatfield saw the insane terror snap in Cavendall's head. Cavendall made his slapping reach for his gun, but before he could get the iron half out of leather the Ranger had whipped a pair of handcuffs from his hip pocket. After the briefest of struggles, Cavendall's wrists were fettered, his gun seized.

"You're the only man in Frontera who knew that package of currency was in the safe, Hal," Hatfield reminded his prisoner. "You tried to draw a gun on me just now. It adds up bad, doesn't it?"

Cavendall stared down at the wrist irons as if in a daze.

"Damn you, Hatfield, you let the man who killed Luke get away, and now you're looking for a scapegoat to save your own rep, and you're trying to pin this thing on me. But I'm innocent, damn you, as innocent as you are."

Hatfield shrugged. "So far," he agreed, "it's circumstantial evidence against you. You had opportunity, motive, all the things a prosecuting attorney would look for in a murder case. I'm sorry, Cavendall, but I've got to lock you up."

"On what charge?" Cavendall demanded hysterically.

"Well, attempted assault on a Texas Ranger with intent to kill. You can't de-

ny reaching for your gun."

Cavendall regained some of his composure during the time it took Hatfield to cover Luke Seebright's corpse with an old wagon sheet, padlock the rear door, close and lock the safe to protect the valuables still inside

"Jim," Hal Cavendall spoke up as he saw Hatfield checking the office calendar to see if the safe robber's sheet of paper had been torn from it. "Jim, that's not my handwriting on that paper, and I'll swear on oath I never gave that combination to a soul."

Hatfield opened the street door and motioned Cavendall outside. With Cavendall's key, left on the inside of the door, he finished locking up the office, glad that Trixie Rockford wasn't here to witness her fiance's arrest.

Heading toward the jail, the two men heard the hymn-singing up on the hilltop cemetery where McTavish's funeral was winding up. Soon Frontera's street would be crowded, and Hatfield wanted his prisoner out of the way before then. Pausing at the dancehall door, Hatfield summoned the deputy on guard. Hardcastle's eyes bulged with astonishment when Hatfield requested the jail keys

Turning them over, Hardcastle blurted, "*He* killed Luke? I thought I saw him with the pallbearers on the stage"

"It's a long story," Hatfield said, hustling Cavendall away. "Keep your lip hobbled about this, savvy?"

The building just beyond the Alamo Saloon was the county jail. A few moments later, with Hal Cavendall lodged in a cell, the Wells Fargo man had shaken off his fright and turned belligerent again.

"You'll pay for this, Hatfield. I'll sue you an' the state of Texas for false ar- 're tryin' to crucify an inno- n to save face for letting Luke's killer give you the slip—to say nothing of that army money."

Hatfield, standing on the other side of the iron bars, said thoughtfully, "You say you originally bought that safe from a grocer who is now dead?"

Cavendall nodded. "I bought the safe from Lige Hawkins when his consumption got the better of him and he had to close his store. He sold every asset he had before he died I needed a safe bigger'n the one Wells Fargo furnishes its agents, so I bought that one"

"How long ago?"

"Hell, it's been five years now since Lige cashed in his chips, and I bought it a year or two before then."

HATFIELD paused in the [illegible] doorway on his way back to the office. "You better cudgel your brains," he advised the prisoner, "and try to recall who Hawkins might have entrusted the combination to. And the next time you buy a safe to store other peoples' money in, Cavendall, you better bring in a locksmith to change the combination."

Hatfield was waiting in the office which had been Bob McTavish's headquarters for more than thirty years, when the first of the funeral cortege got back to the main street. The town's saloons, having been closed in McTavish's honor, were the doors the thirsty mourners headed to first

Stepping to the doorway of the jail office, Hatfield waited until the hearse turned the corner from Cemetery Road. X. T. Keele, purple-faced with exertion, was seated beside the driver. Spotting Hatfield, the coroner called out, "I got your permission to pick up the other body, Ranger Hatfield?"

Hatfield nodded. "You're the official in charge," he said. "I've locked up the Wells Fargo office temporarily, but I'll open it for you."

A big red-faced man whom Hatfield spotted instantly for a bartender came waddling up to the jail steps. "Every saloon in town is goin' to do a land-office business in the next couple hours, Hatfield," the man bellowed, "and I—"

"You're Barney Koontz, proprietor of the Alamo?"

"That I am," Koontz shouted, "and I demand that you let me open my barroom. I demand—"

"No demands necessary," Hatfield said. "Just keep the dancehall portion of your establishment closed to the public for the time being."

Koontz wheeled away, mollified. Then he thought of something else.

"How about all the hardware Keele took from the town—includin' a pair of brass knuckles I keep for business reasons?"

Hatfield grinned. "Take a hunk of soap and write on your front window that guns will be returned beginning at—" The Ranger consulted his watch and saw that it was now four-twenty—"at five o'clock sharp. And," the Ranger added dryly, "X. T. Keele will have his box of hardware in the back end of your barroom at that time, so the customers will have to file through your barroom whether they want to or not—including the owners of your rival saloons."

A crooked grin flickered over Koontz's lips.

"Fair rental for the use of my dancehall, I reckon," the saloonman chuckled. "Hatfield, you're a hombre to ride the river with. I'm sorry I came in half-cocked just now."

Hatfield waved the man off, catching sight of young Del Oakhurst arriving at the level of the main street. One look at the marshal's crestfallen attitude and the Ranger knew he had not spotted a man with the hip pocket torn off his levis among the mourners assembled at the graveyard.

A few moments later Oakhurst was reporting as much to the Ranger. "And I'm certain there wasn't a single hind end got past me without my havin' a good look," he wound up.

Hatfield said, "We've got a lot to do in the next hour, son. There's every chance that Seebright's murderer high-tailed it as soon as he was released from the dancehall line-up, but there is a million-to-one chance that he'll turn up to claim his shooting iron—especially if he turns out to be a Frontera man. He'd have to to avert suspicion from himself."

The Ranger went on to explain that he was allowing X. T. Keele to redistribute the firearms to their proper owners starting at five o'clock sharp in the barroom of the Alamo Saloon.

"I want you to post yourself nearby and size up each man as he comes forward to identify his gun," Hatfield concluded. "Remember to watch for two things—either the levis with the pockets torn off, or a man in a brand-new pair of levis. The killer knows by now that he lost the pants pocket in the fracas with Seebright, so he might change pants."

Oakhurst turned away, shaking his head gloomily. "I got my doubts if the killer would dare show up to reclaim the gun he used to knock off Luke. There'd be an empty shell in the gun cylinder."

"I checked that when I examined each and every gun in the collection," Hatfield said. "The killer replaced the empty. At any rate there wasn't a gun in the box with a burned cap in it."

As an afterthought, Hatfield called Oakhurst back to him. From his pocket the Ranger took the calendar page containing the safe combination. Explaining the story back of his discovery, the Ranger said, "There are two reasons why this paper is interesting, Del. The calendar numerals were printed in green ink, which is unusual, and the combination was written by a man with a fancy handwriting style. Do either of those things—the green ink, the curly-qued penmanship—look familiar to you?"

The young marshal studied the paper at considerable length.

"I've never seen the handwriting before," he said finally, "but danged if the green numerals don't look like a calendar I've seen before somewhere."

Hatfield took the paper back. "You know," he said, "I have exactly the same feeling—that I've seen the green-printed calendar this page was tore off of. Or one like it. There maybe thousands of green calendars scattered around Texas. But if I could find one with a stub of the July page that would match the paper I have—"

CHAPTER VI

Trails End

THE two lawmen parted then, Oakhurst heading for the Alamo Saloon, Hatfield to the Wells Fargo station where he found X. T. Keele and his hearse driver waiting to pick up Luke's corpse.

"After you get him over to the morgue," Hatfield said, "hustle over to the Alamo and ride herd on that box of weapons. I promised the town you'd return their hardware starting at five o'clock."

He unlocked the Wells Fargo door so that X. T. Keele and his assistant could carry out the gruesome chore of transferring the dead hostler to the hearse. A moment later that vehicle was rumbling off in the direction of the Overland Telegraph shack at the western edge of town, where Keele had a lean-to shed which served as county morgue and undertaking parlor.

Alone with his thoughts again, Hatfield's mind kept returning to the green-printed calendar page and the mysterious story it might tell. The green numerals rang a bell in his memory, as he had told Oakhurst—but where had he seen such a calendar before? Was it here in Frontera—or somewhere else?

"If it's here in town, I haven't been in many places where I'd see a calendar on display," Hatfield pondered. "The livery where I stabled Goldy the night I got in, the hotel room, the marshal's office, Cavendall's office, the dancehall."

Feeling the need of washing up after the sandstorm's grime, Hatfield decided to return to his room at the Oasis Hotel. He had paid for two night's lodgings, last night and tonight, it being his original intention to return to a case he was working on at Eagle Pass as soon as he had seen his old *compadre* laid to rest.

But now, with a $50,000 vanishing-loot mystery and a murder case dumped in his lap, he wasn't sure what to do. A telegraphic report of the situation to his superior in Austin, Captain William McDowell, was indicated; but that would have to wait until X. T. Keele, the local telegraph operator, got back to his key.

Entering the cowtown hotel, Hatfield headed over to the clerk's desk to get his room key from the rack of hooks. As he did so, his eyes came to rest on a lithographed calendar depicting Custer's Last Stand which hung on the wall behind the desk. It was advertising a brand of whisky, which meant that similar calendars were probably in every saloon in Texas. But what made the calendar stand out in Hatfield's case was the fact that its pages were printed in bright green ink!

The bald-headed, spade-bearded clerk on duty cleared his throat and said hesitantly, "You're starin' like you see a ghost, Mr. Hatfield. Is anything wrong?"

The Lone Wolf jerked himself back to reality.

"That calendar behind you," he said, trying to keep his voice casual. "There's one like it in my room upstairs, isn't there?"

The clerk nodded. "Whisky drummer give me two dozen, enough for every room in the house. If that picture has taken your fancy, you're welcome to take it with you, sir."

A pulse hammered on the bronzed column of the Ranger's neck

"Let me look over your guest register, please?"

The clerk shrugged, opened the big canvas-bound ledger which rested beside the desk blotter, and shoved it over to the Ranger.

There, under today's date, the clerk had written "Full House." Yesterday, Hatfield counted the blue-ruled lines quickly, seven visitors had checked into the hotel, his own signature included in that number.

"Land office business the last couple days," chuckled the hotel clerk. "Bullet Bob's funeral was the reason, of course. The place will be empty again tomorrow, most likely."

Hatfield was not listening. He was

searching the signatures, studying the style of handwriting on each. He found what he was hunting for at the top of the page, under the date of day before yesterday.

There, written in a flourishing, flamboyant hand, was an entry which put excitement seething through the Ranger's blood:

Rio Barnett, El Paso. Room B. $2 pd, Mon. & Tues.

Barnett's handwriting was full of curlycues, and the "R" in the name Rio matched the fancy letter "R" in the safe combination Hatfield had picked up in the stage office near Luke Seebright's dead body!

"This hombre in Room B," Hatfield said. "Might be an old friend of mine. Rio Barnett, from 'Paso. Has he checked out yet—got here night before last?"

The hotel clerk put on his spectacles, squinted at the key rack, and said, "His key ain't on the hook. Come to think of it, he came in this afternoon an' reserved his room for another night. Yeah. Rio Barnett."

Hatfield said, "What kind of a looking hombre was he? How was he dressed, I mean?"

The clerk shrugged. "Don't rightly recollect, I see so many cowpokes come and go. Why don't you go up and see if it's your friend? Room B's right across the hall from yours."

Hatfield tongued his cheek thoughtfully for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Think I will," he said, and headed up the rickety stairs to reach the top floor of the hotel.

ROOM B's windows overlooked the street and was the second room down the hall from the stair landing. Reaching the door of Rio Barnett's room, Hatfield was surprised to see a key jutting from the lock, hanging from which was the hotel's brass disk identification label

Hatfield eased a sixgun from holster and twirled the cylinder around with his thumb to put a live shell under the firing pin. Holding his breath, he put his ear to the door panels, listening. No sound came from Room B.

With his left hand, Hatfield tapped on the door. Disguising his voice to sound like that of the quavering old clerk downstairs, he called out, "You need towels an' soap, Mr. Barnett? This is the porter."

He got no answer.

Hatfield waited for a long moment, glancing up and down the hall. Then he reached down with his left hand and tested the knob. Room B was unlocked.

With infinite caution, Hatfield swung the door open, gun poised at hip level. His sweeping glance showed him an unmade bed, with a pair of tooled-leather alforja bags hanging from a brass bedpost; a pair of cowboots on the floor in front of a marble-topped washstand; a blue workshirt hanging over the back of a chair which had been placed beside the street window.

Hatfield stepped quickly into the room and eased the door shut noiselessly behind him. The room was identical in furnishings to the one he occupied across the hall, except for one detail: the big china water pitcher on the commode was missing.

The whole picture was complete in the Ranger's mind now. The occupant of this room, Rio Barnett, had taken off his boots and shirt and had carried his water pitcher down the hotel corridor to the water pump located in the washroom at the rear end of the building. The fact that his shaving tools were set out on the wash stand under a cracked mirror told the Ranger that Barnett was probably out for some hot water, which in frontier hotels like this one could usually be obtained by going down the back stairs and slipping a quarter to the cook in the kitchen. Barnett, then, could return at any moment.

In Hatfield's room, the Custer calendar had been tacked to the inside of the door. The Lone Wolf turned now, taut with anticipation.

A green-printed calendar hung from Barnett's door, but it showed the month of August, and this was July.

Reaching in his pocket, Hatfield pulled out the slip of paper containing the Wells Fargo safe combination. He held it up to Barnett's calendar. The torn top of the page matched beyond shadow of a doubt the jagged fringe of paper which had been the July portion of Barnett's calendar.

"You're quite the bloodhound, Ranger."

The leering voice came from across the room, behind Jim Hatfield. Frozen in his tracks, his brain unable to comprehend how any man could have been hiding in this bare room, the Lone Wolf heard the voice speak again: "Drop the gun and turn around, real slow-like, Ranger. I got you covered."

Long years behind a law badge had given Jim Hatfield the knack of knowing when a man was bluffing. This one wasn't.

The Lone Wolf let the Colt .45 drop from his hand. He raised both arms hat-brim high. Then he turned around and saw where he had been careless, assuming the room was empty.

Outside the open window squatted a narrow-faced man with Mongol eyes and a predatory smile—a man Hatfield distinctly remembering having seen in the lineup at the dance hall this afternoon, whom Trixie had passed up without identifying.

The man was squatting on the second-story gallery which ran the full length of the Oasis Hotel. He was shirtless. One hairy forearm rested on the window sill. His right hand held a sixgun, hammer dogged back to full cock, muzzle aimed straight at Hatfield's eyes. He could see the lands spiraling back into the bore. The gun seemed as big as a cannon.

"You'll be Rio Barnett," Hatfield said, breaking the silence. His belly was churning. This, he knew, might be trail's end for him.

The stranger straddled the window sill and, bent low, climbed into the hotel room and stood up. He was wearing bibless levis, and the Ranger had his final, positive proof that he was face to face with Luke Seebright's slayer. The left-hand hip pocket had been ripped from Barnett's overalls, the denim unfaded and dark blue where the patch pocket had been riveted over it.

"Yeah, I shot the Wells Fargo man," the outlaw whispered malevolently. "Why do I admit it? Because I can't hang any higher for killing a Texas Ranger also, now can I?"

Crossing the room behind his out-jutting gun, Barnett reached out for the other Colt still resting in Hatfield's holster.

CHAPTER VII

Ace in the Hole

IN THE split instant it took Rio Barnett's hand to reach out for the Colt handle, Jim Hatfield made his desperate play for escape. His gamble was a heavy one, almost a suicidal risk, but he was staking everything on Barnett's reluctance to trigger his Colt and send a gunblast roaring through the hotel.

Barnett, Hatfield knew, was staying over in Frontera one more night for one reason and one reason only: to recover the $50,000 loot he had, in some mysterious fashion, succeeded in hiding over at the Alamo dancehall this afternoon. And a man who had confessed to the murder of the Wells Fargo hostler would not want to attract attention to the hotel room he was using as a hideout.

Thus it was, at the precise instant that Barnett's fingers touched the bone stock of his sixgun, the Lone Wolf's right hand came plummeting down to seize Barnett's wrist while simultaneously his left hand came down and to one side, grabbing the barrel of Barnett's revolver and cramping it away from his own body.

The gamble paid off. Making his own split-second decision, the gunman from El Paso did not pull trigger. Instead he brought a knee upwards into the Ranger's

groin and attempted to jerk free of Hatfield's grip on his left wrist.

Agony shot through Jim Hatfield, and limpness in its wake. But he concentrated everything on retaining his grips on gun barrel and wrist, at the same moment heaving himself violently away from the door at his back and lunging his full weight against Barnett.

The gunhawk tripped on his own boots lying on the floor behind him and went down, his back crashing the floor with a muffled jolt that shook the room.

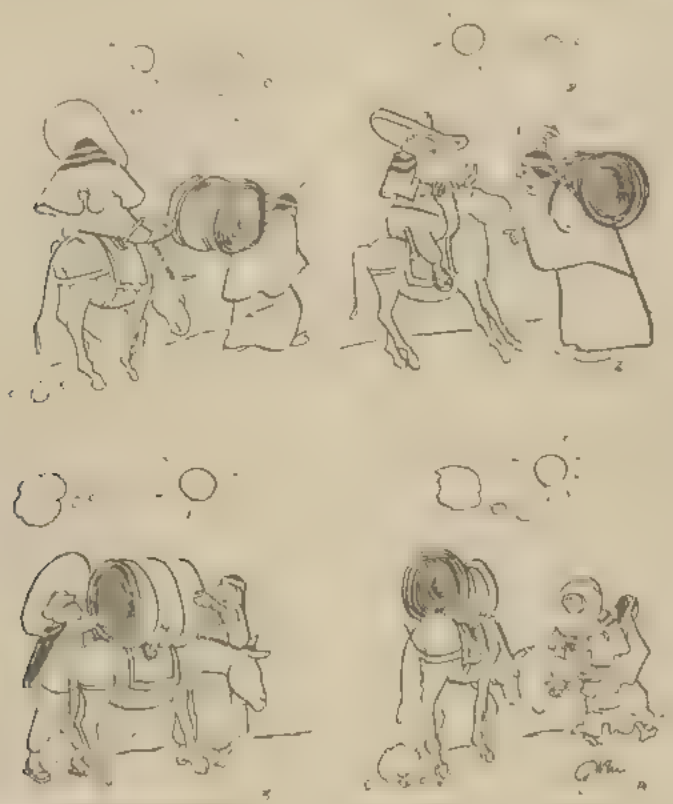
A startled grunt blew from the outlaw's lips as he tried to roll out from under Hatfield while the latter was still trying to recover from the blinding stab of pain that Barnett's knee had put in his vitals.

They rolled over and over in their mutual efforts to shake off the other, finally crashing against the foot of the bedstead with such force that the bed rolled on its casters and smashed into the outside wall.

Like Indians locked in a wrestling match the two men reared to their feet, faces contorted with effort, arms semaphoring as Barnett fought desperately to free himself, Hatfield clinging to gun and left wrist with equal tenacity.

And then, with the first brawling contact made and their initial violence spent, a craftiness entered Rio Barnett's leonine eyes. In El Paso, Barnett was known as a master of the art of barroom brawling. He matched Jim Hatfield's rugged build pound for pound, inch for inch. He knew all the tricks.

Without warning, Barnett let go his grip on the sixgun which Hatfield was holding by the barrel. He fell away, pulling the Ranger off balance, and before Hatfield could use the killer's weapon either as a club or reverse it in his hand to use it as a gun, Barnett brought up his freed fist in a smoking uppercut which exploded like a bomb on the point of Hat-



field's jaw.

They were in mid-room, and the impact of that wilting punch drove the Lone Wolf Ranger twisting away with such violence that he lost his death-hold on Barnett's left arm

As Barnett jerked clear of the Ranger's grip he caused Hatfield's six-shooter to spill from holster, so insecure was Barnett's hold on the gun butt. Every instinct in Hatfield was crying out for his numbed brain to give the order to his left arm to use Barnett's sixgun as a club, to smash Barnett's head and spill his brains before the outlaw could bore in for the kill.

Dizzily, retching with pain and shaking his head to clear the swirling blackness from his eyes, Hatfield was only vaguely aware of the heavy Colt dropping from his hand. Barnett's terrific upppercut to the jaw had been responsible for that.

Instinct made the Ranger fall away from what he knew must be a following blow, although he was virtually blinded by the nerve-paralyzing damage to his jaw. He felt Barnett's knuckles graze his cheekbone, felt the air-whip of the outlaw's looping haymaker as it missed its target.

Barnett's follow-through made the outlaw's rugged body pivot, left him wide open for a counter punch which could have ended the brief, savage fight then and there on Hatfield's side.

Hatfield's vision was clearing. He saw the opening. But before he could rally his flagging senses and turn his hands into fists the opportunity was forever gone and Barnett was making his swooping grab for the gun he had jerked from the Ranger's thonged-down holster.

The Ranger lurched out to partially block Barnett's grab. The outlaw emitted a muffled shriek of pain—the first sound either fighter had uttered since the fight began—as Hatfield's stamping boot toe struck his hand and brought blood from a split knuckle. Before Barnett could make another grab for the fallen sixgun, Hatfield kicked the bone-handled weapon across the floor and under the wash stand.

The two men backed away from each other now, like evenly-matched fighters between rounds. Their lungs were heaving, their breathing was stertorous; yet neither, as yet, had made any more noise than was necessary.

THIS room, being at the end of the hall, probably did not transmit the sounds of man-to-man combat to the ears of the clerk down in the front lobby. Each man had equal reason not to want to attract any outsider to Room B. For Hatfield's part, he knew that Barnett might have an accomplice with him here in Frontera, possibly booking the next room. And Rio Barnett knew he was fighting for his life in a very literal sense. He was tangling with the most dangerous man in Texas, so far as an owlhooter was concerned. And defeat now could only lead to a hangman's gallows.

That desperate knowledge was in Rio Barnett's eyes as he came charging at Hatfield again in the raw, elemental fury of a brawler who sought to win by sheer overpowering ferocity.

But Hatfield, having had the worst of it so far, was now calling on his superior skill, his matchless footwork. He had ticketed Barnett for a gunfighter, a professional lead slinger, and such men invariably took good care of their hands, avoiding fist fights wherever possible. That lack of experience in boxing, both offensive and defensive, was in the Ranger's favor now.

Although his head was still swimming with fireworks and his body was aflame from crotch to wishbone, Hatfield danced out from under Barnett's rush and stung the El Paso killer with a hard left to the face and a right to the short ribs which smashed the air from Barnett's lungs.

Bad hurt for the first time since the fight had started, Barnett reeled away, sidling toward the inner wall of the room. Too late, Hatfield saw his purpose. Barnett went into a crouch and picked up a wooden chair beside the dresser, lifting it high over head as he charged Hatfield again.

The Ranger countered the blow with an uplifted arm but there was force

enough to shatter the chair into matchwood and the shock of it drove Hatfield off his feet and down on all fours.

He heard the cawing oath issue from Barnett's throat. But as he edged crabwise away, knowing Barnett's next attack would be with the hardwood chair leg he still clutched in his fist, Hatfield's spread hand fell hard and flat on the curved cylinder of Barnett's own sixgun.

A groan of despair issued from Barnett as he saw Hatfield scoop up the gun, heard the ominous double click of the hammer as the Ranger dogged it back to full cock.

Hatfield came up, hand fighting the dead weight of the gun. Barnett stood arrested in his tracks, knowing the Ranger would shoot him down without hesitation.

"'*Sta bueno*, Hatfield," the El Paso gunhawk said, his whole stance seeming to wilt as he let the hickory chair leg clatter to the floor. "I had my chance and muffed it. You win."

Hatfield felt the salty-sweet taste of blood in his mouth. He couldn't remember the blow that had loosened his upper teeth and put the great welt on his cheek. He spat stringy red threads of saliva to clear his mouth and waited until the room stopped swimming around him before he answered Rio Barnett.

"Turn around," the Lone Wolf ordered, "hands together behind your back. I'm hog-tying you before we take a pasear to the jail."

With his free hand, Hatfield pulled from his hip pocket the handcuffs he had so recently unlocked from Hal Cavendall's wrists over at the jail. The vague thought streaked through Hatfield's throbbing brain: the two of them were together on that Wells Fargo deal, they had to be.

Barnett turned his back and offered no resistance as Hatfield shackled his wrists with the steel bracelets.

"Sit down, Barnett. On the edge of the bed."

Barnett shrugged and did as he was ordered. His Mongol eyes followed Hatfield as the latter walked over to the washstand, set the cocked sixgun handy on the marble ledge, and dipped both hands into the bowl of water there. "Hatfield," Barnett said while the Ranger was scooping double handfuls of water over his face, "let's talk business right here, not after you've marched me across the street to the calaboose. A lynch mob might take me away from you on the way."

Hatfield picked up a towel and carefully dried himself, watching Barnett like a hawk every instant, knowing the man was dangerous, even with his arms fettered behind him.

"Business?" the Lone Wolf echoed. "The only business I've got with you, besides turning you over to Marshal Oakhurst to await trial for murder, is the little matter of where you stashed that army payroll money you stole today."

A grin broke the taut fixture of Barnett's mouth.

"There was fifty thousand in greenbacks in that parcel, Hatfield. And it's yours, every last peso of it—if you play your cards right. No one would ever know."

Hatfield reached under the bed and recovered the gun he had kicked there. Then he reclaimed the other gun he had dropped at the foot of the hallway door.

Thrusting the Colts into their holsters, the Ranger leaned back against the wall, regarding his prisoner thoughtfully. All he had to do, to find out where Barnett had cached that money, was to pretend to go along with the bribe offer. Would the end justify the means?

"You're a clever man, Hatfield," Barnett went on in his purring, unctuous voice. "You have to be, to enjoy the reputation of being the ace Ranger in the Frontier Battalion. Now we'll see how clever you really are. You'd like to get that fifty thousand in your hands, wouldn't you?"

When Hatfield did not answer immediately, Barnett played another card: "Oh, I'm not trying to bribe you, Jim. You wouldn't use that money for yourself, of course not. That would be dis-

honorable. But you'd like to recover the money for Wells Fargo, wouldn't you? The decision is entirely up to you."

Hatfield said carefully, "I don't have to make any deals with you, you know. The money's inside that dance hall. Sooner or later I'll find it. You'll have gone to the hangman's gallows before I find it, maybe, but I'll turn up that money."

Barnett winced at the word "hangman," but instantly regained his composure

"Hatfield, listen to me. You'll never find that dinero without my help, never. I'm not bluffing. You could search till hell freezes over for all the good it'll do you."

Hatfield decided to try another tack From his shirt pocket he drew the folded sheet of paper torn from the calendar on the inner side of the door by his elbow.

"In your hurry to leave the Wells Fargo office this afternoon," the Ranger said, "you left this little souvenir beside the safe "

Barnett nodded. "I know. That's the clue that brought you to this room. I was on my way to the washroom for a pitcher of hot water to shave with when I saw you coming over from the stage office. I knew sooner or later you'd check my signature on the hotel book, and the green calendar would lead you to Room B. That's why I left through the window and waited for you."

Hatfield stared vacantly at the safe combination on the blank side of the paper

"Who," he asked suddenly, "dictated this to you? Hal Cavendall?"

Barnett shrugged. "I may be a low hombre, Hatfield, but I do not squeal on my *compañeros*. I'll admit I was imported to rob that safe while the town was occupied with McTavish's funeral, yeah That's fairly obvious. But the name of my employer—uh-uh."

Hatfield hooked thumbs in shell belts and stood for a longish interval, trying to figure out his next move.

"You mentioned a fifty thousand dollar bribe in return for your freedom," the Ranger said finally. "What's the deal?"

Barnett grinned enigmatically. "Let me walk out of this hotel and over to the livery barn where I've got my horse. Let me have your word of honor, Hatfield, that I'll have a one-hour head start toward the Rio Grande before you turn Oakhurst and his posse on my trail. In return for that you get the fifty thousand dollar package I hid. You'd never find it otherwise."

In spite of himself, Hatfield had to admire the outlaw's audacity. Misinterpreting the Ranger's hesitation in answering, Rio Barnett added, "You can wait until the money is actually in your hands before you turn me loose, if you want it that way. What better deal could you ask, Ranger?"

Amazement flickered in Hatfield's eyes. "I believe you really would show your hole card with only my word in the kitty, Barnett."

The gunhawk smiled mockingly. "Your word is good enough for me to stake my neck on, Ranger."

For a long interval, Hatfield was silent, as if wrestling with himself over some hard-to-come-by decision. Then, crossing the room, he gestured for Barnett to stand up and turn around. A moment later Hatfield was unlocking the killer's handcuffs

Rio Barnett turned to face Hatfield, eyes ashine with excitement, stubby fingers massaging his wrists. Then he whispered:

"Okay, you've turned me loose, I'll live up to my side of the bargain. That fifty thousand dollar package—"

CHAPTER VIII

A Woman's Love

"HOLD it," the Lone Wolf interrupted Barnett. "I'm not making a deal with you. I freed your arms so you can

put on your shirt and boots. I'm taking you to jail, Barnett."

For a moment Barnett stood staring at the Ranger as if such incorruptibility was beyond his comprehension. Then, moving slowly and deliberately, the outlaw sat down on the bed and began tugging on his cowboots.

"I might have known I couldn't buy a Ranger," mused the outlaw from El Paso. "But—what the hell? I wasn't born to hang. I've got an ace left in the hole, Hatfield."

Hatfield walked over to pick up Barnett's shirt and toss it to him. "It had better be a good one, then," the Ranger drawled.

"It is. The hombre who hired me to lift that fifty thousand won't let me hang before—" Barnett clamped his mouth shut. He stood up, fumbling at the buttons of his shirt. "Come on," he said resignedly. "Take me to your two-bit jail, Ranger. That don't mean I'll stretch hemp for murderin' that Wells Fargo swamper. I won't stay in your jail for long."

Handcuffing himself to his prisoner, Hatfield led the way out in the hallway, startling a half-drunk cowboy who was trying to get a key in the lock of an adjoining room.

"Maybe you got a surprise in store for you when we get to the jailhouse, Barnett," the Ranger said, thinking of Hal Cavendall. "Maybe you'll find the hombre who hired you to rob that safe is behind bars ahead of you."

A few moments later, reaching the jail office with his prisoner, Hatfield found the coroner and Marshal Oakhurst going over the official papers in connection with Luke Seebright's death.

"The hombre with the torn pants didn't show up to claim his gun, Jim," Oakhurst said ruefully, before he noticed the handcuffs linking the two men together. "One gun was left unclaimed—the gun that killed Luke Seebright."

"Well," Hatfield said, "here's the man who fired that gun. Unlock the bullpen, marshal."

X. T. Keele looked up from his death certificate, staring in amazement at the scantling-lean stranger handcuffed to the Texas Ranger. Hatfield's statement was so earth-shattering that neither the coroner nor Oakhurst appeared to notice the bruises beginning to show on Hatfield's face.

"You mean you've got a confession already?" gasped Keele. "That'll mean makin' out a new death certificate. I just listed Luke Seebright's killer as 'unknown.'"

Rio Barnett's lips quirked enigmatically. "And so far as I'm concerned you

A TALL TEXAS TALE

MAD MONTANANS

A TEXAN recently got the shock of his after-life when he chanced to go to Heaven. At first he was pleased with what he saw—the pearly streets, the golden aura over everything and all that. But he was considerably taken back to suddenly come upon people chained to posts.

Saint Peter happened to be coming along, and the Texan gulpingly asked, "What—what did they do?"

"Oh, nothing," the Saint said. "It's just that they're from Montana and they keep wanting to go back."

—*Harold Helfer*

can leave it that way, Señor," the El Paso gunman drawed. "I ain't confessed nothin'."

Del Oakhurst hurried over to unlock the bullpen door. Outside it was sundown time, but the narrow-windowed cell block was dark except for a pool of lanternlight at the far end, where Hal Cavendall was eating supper off a tray in his cell.

Hatfield removed the handcuffs from his own and Barnett's wrist and, drawing a gun, ushered the El Paso man into the bullpen, down the narrow hall and into the cell opposite the Wells Fargo man's. Either the two were consumate actors or had never seen each other before, for Hatfield detected no signs of recognition between Cavendall and Barnett.

"I'd be obliged, Hatfield," Cavendall said bitterly, "if you'd let Trixie know where I am. She can get me a lawyer."

"I'll let her know," the Lone Wolf said, and headed back to the front office to slump wearily into McTavish's old easy chair. Oakhurst, following him back out, said, "Who's this stranger you brought in? What's the story? What charge do I book him on? And what's the story on Cavendall? I about keeled over when I walked in and saw him roosting in my cooler."

Keele, seating himself in a barrel chair alongside the late Marshal McTavish's desk, said testily to Oakhurst, "Didn't you see the hombre's pants pocket was torn off? He's the killer who robbed the safe and knocked off Luke."

Oakhurst picked up a Bisley .38 revolver from the desk

"This gun," he told Hatfield, "is the only one that wasn't reclaimed from X. T.'s box. Keele says if he digs a .38 slug out of Seabright's brisket it'll prove this gun was the murder weapon, all right."

Keele was busy stuffing papers into a scarred briefcase.

"Which reminds me," the coroner said, "that corpses don't keep in this climate, and I got to be goin' on with the embalmin' of Luke's remains. Del has set the inquest for tomorrow morning, Ranger Hatfield. As coroner, I have the power to subpoena you to stick around town to testify, but I don't imagine that's necessary."

Hatfield pressed fingertips to aching eyeballs. He was just beginning to feel the effects of his fight with Barnett.

"Stick around five minutes, Mr. Keele," Hatfield said, "and I'll give you the lowdown on who Barnett is, where I got the bruises on my jaw, and why I locked up Hal Cavendall. All I ask is that you keep this information confidential."

Oakhurst and Keele drew their chairs closer to Hatfield's, faces strained with suspense, eyes snapping with anticipation

SLOWLY, and lisping slightly due to his bruised lips and loose teeth, Hatfield outlined the events of the afternoon as they led up to the arrest and imprisonment of Cavendall and the stranger who had signed the Oasis Hotel book as Rio Barnett.

"We've got a pretty air-tight case against Barnett," the Lone Wolf concluded his narrative, "but a clever lawyer might be able to get a hung jury on Cavendall's part in the stage robbery. The only thing I've actually got against Cavendall is that he has said in public that he is the only person in Frontera who knew the combination to the Wells Fargo safe —and yet we know the man who killed Luke Seebright opened the safe from this written combination I showed you."

X. T. Keele licked his thick lips. "But the missing fifty thousand dollars—this Barnett didn't tell you where he hid it?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Only that I could never find it in the Alamo dancehall where we thought it had to be."

Oakhurst blinked incredulously. "But we've got Trixie's word for it that the killer had the package of dinero with him when he went through the Alamo door! And Hardcastle can testify that him and Trixie came in right behind the masked man, so we know he sure as hell didn't get back out."

Hatfield said ruefully, "I went over

that dancehall with a fine tooth comb, Del, and every man who went through our line was searched."

"Searched by the man you think maybe in cahoots with the killer, though!" young Oakhurst said in a dismayed voice. He looked from X. T. Keele to Hatfield. "I've got it!" he said. "When the killer—Barnett or whoever it was—came to Cavendall, he slipped the package to Cavendall without anybody noticing—and Cavendall walked out with it!"

Keele slapped his knee. "Ranger, the kid's right! That's the only way it could have been! Cavendall was the only man who knew the payroll shipment was coming to town and was in the safe! Of course it was Cavendall."

Jim Hatfield, taking his luxurious ease in the Morris chair, closed his eyes against the sundown glare streaming through the office windows.

"I'm sorry to dash cold water on your theory, boys," he said drowsily, "but I searched Hal Cavendall very carefully before I let him out that door. That isn't the answer. Cavendall didn't carry the $50,000 bundle out the dancehall. So, it's still there. Assuming we rule out Trixie and the parson. *They* weren't searched."

X. T. Keele got to his feet, glancing nervously at the wall clock over the marshall's desk. It had stopped at 2:30, the hour when McTavish's funeral had been interrupted by Trixie Rockford's report of Luke Seebright's murder—and the coroner remembered with a superstitious shudder that the jail clock had been wound for the past thirty years by a man now dead, McTavish himself.

"I've got to start working on Luke's remains," the coroner said. "This is all very confusing, to say the least. But at least our suspects are safely behind bars. And the fifty thousand will be found eventually, it's got to be. Even if we have to take down the Alamo board by board and nail by nail."

Hatfield said musingly, "Barnett's got something up his sleeve. He's not the bluffing type. He says he's got an ace in the hole. And I think he has."

"Meaning what?" Keele demanded, tucking his briefcase under his arm.

"My guess is that Barnett is waiting for his confederate to make the next move," Hatfield said. "Del, you'd better put Hardcastle on guard duty here at the jail tonight, to circumvent any possible attempt to spring Barnett out of jail."

Keele grunted smugly. "If his confederate was Cavendall, we got nothing to worry about."

"Unless," Hatfield said pessimistically, "Barnett wasn't alone when he arrived in town. He might have brought a partner along with him, for all we know."

Keele, impatient to get back to his embalming job at the morgue, was heading for the door when the Ranger thought of something. "Wait a minute, Keele. Could you get a telegram on the wire for me? I've got to notify my superiors at Ranger headquarters in the State capitol and request permission to remain in Frontera."

"Sure, write it out and I'll send it, Hatfield. After all, brass pounding pays me a steadier income than the undertaking trade ever has."

Using Oakhurst's pencil and paper, Hatfield scribbled a terse message to Roaring Bill McDowell in Austin, explaining the situation in Frontera and asking to be reassigned from the case he was working on in Eagle Pass.

Accepting the paper, Keele said, "You should have an answer back in an hour—I'll deliver it if one shows up," and left.

HATFIELD turned back to young Oakhurst. "I promised Hal Cavendall I'd let his girl know about his being in jail. Where does Trixie Rockford live?"

Oakhurst replied, "Upstairs over the postoffice. You know, Jim, some of your professional skepticism has rubbed off on me. I mean, suspecting everybody in a murder case, exactly opposite what the U.S. Constitution preaches. It's an unhappy state of mind for a man to be in."

"I've disillusioned you?" Hatfield said. "Any man who wears a law badge must expect disillusionment, son."

Oakhurst grinned sheepishly. "I was just

thinking about Trixie. I've known that girl since she was a pigtailed tomboy as freckled as a bird egg. Matter of fact," Oakhurst went on to confide, "I fell in love with her before Cavendall even showed up, transferred to Frontera by Wells Fargo. After he started courtin' her, I didn't have a chance."

Hatfield got up out of the Morris chair and stretched his aching muscles. "So you're pretty sure Cavendall is guilty."

Oakhurst shook his head. "I'm not thinking about him. Jim, all of our huntin' for that stolen package of money has been based on what Trixie told us. Right? She saw the killer grab up the package, she saw him dash into the saloon with it."

Hatfield nodded, beginning to get the drift of Oakhurst's thinking. "Why, yes!" he admitted. "All we've had to go on was Trixie Rockford's version. For all we know, the killer could have high-tailed it without grabbing up the payroll package."

The young marshal tongued his cheek thoughtfully. "See what I mean? I know Trixie ain't got a sinful bone in her body. But I keep askin' myself, if Cavendall stole that money he'd use his share for buildin' that house for his bride. It's Trixie's house, and Trixie might not be above stealin' the money to make her dream come true. Trixie might—oh, hell's fire, Hatfield! What am I sayin'? I'd marry her tonight, if she'd have me!"

Hatfield slapped Oakhurst on the back. "I'll head down to Trixie's and break the news about Cavendall," he said, "and then I'm heading for that Chinese restaurant next door to the bank and get some chow. I haven't eaten since breakfast, and that seems like a long, long time ago."

"You coming back after you eat?"

The Lone Wolf Ranger nodded. "I sure am, amigo. I aim to have a session with Cavendall and Barnett, face to face, back there in the cell block. Before I go to bed tonight I want to know what became of that Fort Presidio payroll package."

It was a full twenty minutes after Hatfield's departure when Del Oakhurst heard a clatter of running feet on the plank walk outside. He swung his swivel chair around from his desk, where he had been engrossed in some tax collection bookkeeping, when the door opened and Trixie Rockford stepped into the office.

Oakhurst whipped off his stetson and came to his feet, feeling as always a shivery sensation down his neck-nape when he looked at the girl he had loved ever since he could remember. She had changed to a form-fitting yellow cotton dress which hugged the voluptuous lines of her bosom and hips, presenting a picture which put fire in a man's blood.

"Del," the girl panted breathlessly, "the Ranger just told me about Hal. It's an outrage—jailing him, I mean."

Oakhurst flushed. "Don't blame me for that. Or Jim Hatfield, either. Things don't look too good for Cavendall, we might as well face that fact."

The color faded from Trixie's hot cheeks.

"You mean Hal might be railroaded to a hangnoose?"

The marshal swallowed hard. He had never seen Trixie looking quite so beautiful as she did tonight.

"Well, now, Trixie, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Put it this way, Hal's in bad trouble, deep trouble."

Trixie Rockford passed a trembling hand across her eyes.

"I can see him, talk to him, can't I? Hatfield didn't forbid you letting me in to see Hal, did he?"

Oakhurst pulled his ring of jail keys from a desk drawer.

"I'd like to remind you," he said archly, "that *I* am in charge of this jail, and have been ever since Bob McTavish died. If I say you can get in to see Hal, you can. And I do. You're engaged to him, aren't you?"

"Bless you, Del."

As Oakhurst turned and headed toward the bullpen door, the girl's eyes came to rest on the Bisley .38 revolver which X. T. Keele believed was the weapon which had killed Luke.

Snatching up the gun by its barrel, Trixie headed after young Oakhurst, a terrible resolve forming in her mind.

Oakhurst was saying as he inserted a big key in the lock of the bullpen door, "You can talk with Hal until Hatfield gets back, Trixie. He might object, but—"

Trixie's arm lifted and fell. The Bisley stock made a sodden, meaty thwack as it rapped Oakhurst's skull behind the right ear

A little sigh escaped the marshal's lips. He toppled forward against the wall, his hand breaking free of the keyring. Then he skidded limply down the wall to lie in a motionless sprawl at Trixie's feet. He hadn't even felt the blow . . .

Smothering a sob, the desperate girl pulled the marshal's inert shape to one side so she could pull the cell block door open. As she headed down the corridor she heard Hal Cavendall's voice from the far cell: "Trixie—I knew you'd come."

CHAPTER IX

A Second Dead Man

RANGER Jim Hatfield took his time eating supper, in the seclusion of a bamboo-curtained booth in Shanghai Lo's restaurant.

He felt completely bushed by the day's events, both spiritually and physically. While Bob McTavish's death had been crowded into the background of his thoughts, his old friend's passing had been a severe shock to Hatfield

Rarely had he ever been up against such a baffling enigma as the missing loot from the Wells Fargo safe, either. He could have solved that riddle by letting Rio Barnett speak his piece, in the hotel room after their bruising fist-fight. But Hatfield's deep-grained sense of honor would not permit his buying vital knowledge with the spurious coin of the double-cross. If he had accepted Barnett's information, he would have had to give the gunslinger his freedom, according to the terms of the bargain Barnett had outlined. And he was convinced, in his own mind, that Barnett had pulled the trigger that had snuffed out Luke Seebright's life. Rangers didn't make deals with murderers.

A healthy tip slipped to the black-queued oriental who ran the restaurant had purchased the privacy of this curtained booth, otherwise Hatfield would have been mobbed by curious townsmen and hero-worshippers eager for a chance to shake the famous Ranger's hand.

Supper finished, Jim Hatfield slipped out into the starbright night by means of Shanghai Lo's back door. He paid a visit to the stable where he had left his sorrel stallion, Goldy, upon his arrival in town yesterday. His mount's welfare was something the Lone Wolf Ranger never took for granted, or left to the indifferent hands of a stable boy.

"Maybe we'll be heading back to Eagle Pass *mañana*, and maybe we won't, Goldy," Hatfield murmured to his equine partner. "Reminds me I better be lighting a shuck over to Keele's telegraph office and finding out if Keele's got an answer to my telegram to Roaring Bill in Austin. If I'm going to follow through on this case I got to have an official assignment."

Keeping to dimly-lighted back streets and weed-littered vacant lots, Jim Hatfield angled across Frontera in the direction of X. T. Keele's combined telegraph office and undertaking parlor.

Arriving there he saw windows gleaming with lamplight in both sections of the building The black-plumed hearse wagon which had headed Bullet Bob McTavish's funeral cortege this afternoon was parked in an open shed next to the building Keele used as a morgue

Hatfield headed for the latter room, knowing Keele was probably busy embalming Luke Seebright's body tonight. He peered through the murky window pane in the morgue wall to see that X. T. Keele was not inside. The Wells Fargo hostler's corpse was lying on a stone slab, ghostily outlined under a soiled sheet.

In the front of the building a telegraph sounder made its dry clacking, and Hatfield headed along the wall in that direction, hoping his message was coming over

the wires.

He was not entirely sure that his superior, Captain William McDowell, would permit him to remain in Frontera to solve this case. The main responsibility for recovering the missing army money and bringing Seebright's killer to justice rested on the local law enforcement officers, Oakhurst and Hardcastle, and it was possible that Hatfield had already solved the case for them when he jailed Barnett and Hal Cavendall. Besides, Hatfield was already engaged in the climactic phases of an important case in Eagle Pass involving Rio Grande narcotics smugglers. He had been granted an unprecedented leave of absence to be a pallbearer at McTavish's funeral today.

The telegraph office door was open and Hatfield walked in to find X. T. Keele nowhere in evidence. But he saw his own name on a carbon-copy flimsy of a message which Keele had evidentally just received off the wire and placed on a spike on the counter. Disappointment flooded through Hatfield as he read:

> Let local law handle case in Frontera. More important you return Eagle Pass
> McDowell

Hatfield headed back toward town. Captain McDowell's orders were final; he would have to ride out at dawn tomorrow, as originally planned. But he knew Del Oakhurst was not competent to solve this case here in Frontera. He was too young and inexperienced.

THE Ranger was nearing the brightly-lighted saloon and gambling hall district in the heart of town when he heard X. T. Keele shout his name from across the street. Turning, he saw the coroner lumbering toward him at a clumsy trot, yelling:

"I've got news for you, Ranger—important news!"

Hatfield met the coroner in mid-street. "I know, Keele, I took the liberty of reading the copy of that wire from Austin."

"No, no," croaked the big man, grabbing Hatfield's shoulder. "I just delivered that telegram to the jail house, and that's where I run into the news, Jim. There's hell to pay."

The desperation in X. T. Keele's voice told Hatfield that the coroner indeed had important news, but he had to wait for the coroner to regain wind enough for another spurt of words: "Take it easy, Keele, you'll have a heart attack. What happened?"

X. T. Keele leaned hard on the Lone Wolf Ranger. "It's Cavendall," he wheezed. "He's broke jail—with Trixie's help!"

Hatfield was stunned. "The hell! Wasn't Oakhurst guarding the jail?"

Keele said asthmatically, fighting for breath, "It was like this. I'd just dug that fatal bullet out of Seebright's skull—it was a .38 out of that Bisley, all right—when I heard the telegraph sounder tapping out my call. It was your message from Ranger headquarters, callin' you back to Eagle Pass, so I decided to tote it right over to the jail office for you. Well, when I got there, I found Oakhurst lyin' on the floor with a bloody head."

"Oakhurst was dead?"

"No, just knocked out. I sloshed water on his noggin and revived him. He told me the last thing he could remember was Trixie Rockford comin' in and askin' permission to see Cavendall."

Again Keele had to pause to recover his wind. Despair swam through Hatfield's being in sick waves. He was remembering what Trixie had told him at her home above the Frontera postoffice tonight when he had told her of Cavendall's arrest: "You won't make it stick, Ranger Hatfield. He won't stay in jail long."

"Anyway," the portly coroner went on with his narrative, "Trixie must have slugged Oakhurst from behind with something or other. I hustled back into the cell block. Cevendall's cell door was wide open and he was gone. Story's plain enough, ain't it?"

Hatfield groaned. A jail break, coming on the heels of the news from Austin that McDowell was ordering him to leave Frontera tomorrow morning.

He said in a sick monotone, "How about Rio Barnett? He escaped too, I suppose."

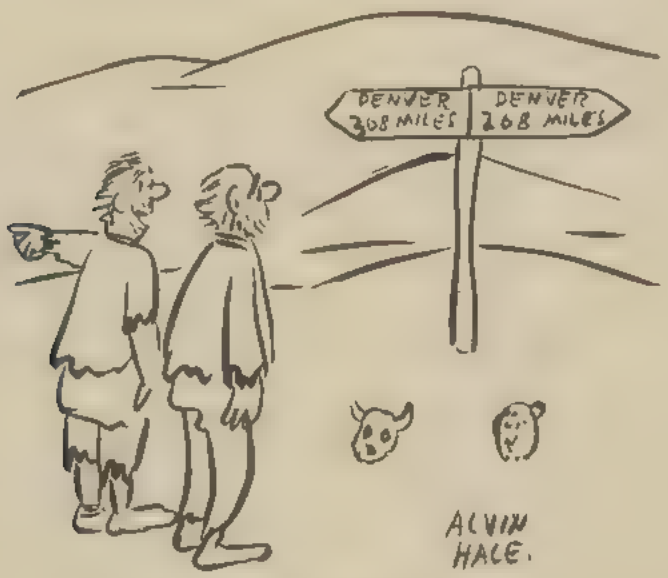
To Hatfield's astonishment, Keele shook his head. "No Barnett's cell is locked and he's sprawled out on his cot under a blanket, sleeping like nothing had happened. Trixie must have been pretty quiet about it, sneaking into the bullpen and unlocking Cavendall's cage."

"What did Barnett say when you woke him up?"

"I didn't wake him up, Hatfield. Oakhurst was hollerin' for me to locate you into outlawry Cavendall had decided to abandon his partner in crime.

Arriving at the jail office, Hatfield found Del Oakhurst sitting at his desk, his head wrapped in a bloody towel. Still groggy, Oakhurst asked feebly, "Keele find you? You know?"

"Yes, I know," Hatfield snapped. "I know you let a red-headed woman play you for a sucker. I'm sorry for Trixie. She's ruined her own life Even if she and Cavendall escape, she'll be exiled from Texas from here on out."



"Let's go the left way—probably more to see on it."

as quick as possible. I tried your hotel and you were out."

Hatfield said, "Okay. I'll head over to the jail. You can get back to your undertaking chores, Keele."

Heading back toward the jail, Hatfield was half sick with frustration and disgust. Hal Cavendall's jail break was convincing proof that he was guilty of complicity in the Wells Fargo robbery. And his reason for leaving Barnett behind bars was easy to understand: having taken the big step

Tears streamed from Oakhurst eyes as he ripped the tin star off his shirt and threw it violently across the room. Hatfield, half way to the bullpen door on his way to Barnett's cell, said disgustedly, "What was that childish tantrum supposed to prove? That you're quitting when the chips are down? Brace up, Oakhurst!"

Getting to his feet, Oakhurst lurched across the room to pick up the law badge. He said humbly, "I'm not fit to wear this star, that's all. Bob McTavish pinned it

on me the first time, Jim, and I thought I was worthy of it then. But regardless of what Trixie put over on me tonight, I see this isn't the time to be resignin'."

Hatfield's mouth softened with approval. "I'll have a little talk with Rio Barnett," he said. "He couldn't have slept through what happened, even if Keele thought he was asleep."

Heading down the cell block corridor, Hatfield saw the visible proof of Trixie Rockford's illegal act tonight. The door of Hal Cavendall's cell was wide open, the keys still projecting from the lock. Cavendall's supper tray was under the cot

Jerking the keys from the door of Cavendall's empty cell, Hatfield turned to Barnett's cage opposite. As X. T. Keele had reported, the El Paso gunman was lying on his side, back to the cell door, sprawled at full length on his cot with a blue army blanket covering him for the night.

"*Barnett!*" Hatfield shouted, hunting for the key that would let him inside the outlaw's cell. "Rise and shine. I know damn well you're playing possum."

The figure on the cot did not move. And then Hatfield saw the little black puddle of liquid on the brick floor under the head of cot. Even as he watched, a ruby droplet seeped down through the thin cotton blanket which served as a mattress under Barnett and added to the puddle.

At the same instant Hatfield caught sight of the Bisley .38 revolver lying half hidden in the shadow under the open steel door of Cavendall's cell. He stooped to retrieve the gun, recognizing it as the one Oakhurst believed had been the murder weapon in the Seebright case

Hatfield sniffed the muzzle, placed the barrel against the super-sensitive skin of his upper lip.

The metal was warm; the bore was fouled with recently burned powder grains

The Ranger's eyes were grim as he thrust the .38 under the waistband of his chaps and went on to unlock Barnett's cell. He knew what he was going to find here.

He stepped inside and lifted the army blanket which someone had draped over the outlaw from El Paso. After a moment he let the army blanket drop back, then lifted it to cover Rio Barnett's head. Barnett wouldn't be revealing his $50,000 secret.

For Barnett was dead. He had been shot between the eyes. Powder burns and singed hair on his forelock proved the gun had been thrust through the cell bars and was probably touching Barnett's forehead when the trigger was pulled.

"Business is booming for X. T. Keele today," he muttered, and made his way back to the front office

He found Oakhurst arguing with a wild-eyed stranger in the doorway. The man was familiar; Hatfield believed he had seen the man—a sandy-mustached, bald-headed oldster with one cropped ear—at the funeral services this afternoon

Oakhurst turned as he heard Hatfield enter. "Jim," the marshal said, "this is Hondo Rockford, Trixie's father. The postmaster. He's got a note here from his daughter Hondo, this is Jim Hatfield, the Ranger"

The Frontera postmaster lurched past Oakhurst and shoved a sheet of lilac-tinted, perfumed note paper in Hatfield's hand

"I worked late at the postoffice tonight, sortin' mail for the outgoin' stage," Rockford yammered. "Trixie was upstairs fixin' my supper. When I went up to eat, she wasn't around, and this note was propped up on the dinin' room table."

Hatfield's eyes raced over Trixie's hasty scribble:

> Precious Daddy,
>
> Hal and I have left for Mexico. We're going to be married there. Don't try to find us. Something's happened, it isn't safe for Hal to remain in Texas. Just trust me and love me and I will write later
>
> All my love,
> Your Trixie.

"There ain't no damned sense in her elopin'" Rockford bawled, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I want Oakhurst to light out after them two. Nearest ferry across the Rio Grande is at Candelaria. That's forty miles from here. And the

nearest Mexican town would be Coyama, another day's ride—you could ketch up with 'em afore they get married."

Hatfield said heavily, "That note was meant to reach my eyes, Mr. Rockford—and meant to throw us off the track. You hustle over to Keele's telegraph office, though, and have him wire the marshal at Candelaria to pick up Cavendall and your daughter if they should show up at the ferry."

Old man Rockford turned away. "I know they eloped," he said piteously, "because Trixie's horse and mine ain't in their stalls at the Wells Fargo barn."

After Trixie's father had gone, Hatfield tossed the Bisley .38 on Barnett's desk.

"I've got some bad news for you, Del," he said gently, wondering if young Oakhurst was in shape for another shock so soon after his gun whipping.

"I know," the marshal said miserably. "Keele told me. About the Ranger Headquarters calling you back to Eagle Pass. That leaves me to handle this business alone. Jim, I—I don't know if I can handle the job."

Hatfield said, "I wasn't referring to the telegram Keele brought over here, Del. What you don't know is that Rio Barnett is dead. He was murdered in his cell during the jail break."

Oakhurst could only stare. When he finally spoke, he was thinking of himself rather than Frontera's latest murder victim.

"It could have been Trixie who shot him—and I would be expected to track her down for the hangman. I couldn't do that."

The Lone Wolf felt suddenly very, very weary.

"I'm going back to my hotel," he said. "and get some sleep. We can't track the eloping lovers tonight anyway. You'd better go home yourself, Del. There's nobody left in the jail to guard."

"But what about Barnett? Do I just leave him—lying there?"

Hatfield's answer came floating back from the street: "Go tell X. T. Keele to pick up some more cold meat, I guess. See you in the morning, marshal."

Five minutes later Hatfield was entering his room at the Oasis Hotel. He fumbled in the band of his stetson for a match and got the washstand lampwick going. He was fixing the sooty chimney on its prongs when his eyes, slitted against the slow-blooming glare of lamplight, saw a girl's image reflected in the blistered mirror in front of the washstand.

He knew before he turned around that it was Trixie Rockford, and that she was waiting for him with a gun pointed at his back. Just as she might have pointed a gun at Rio Barnett.

CHAPTER XI

Hatfield's Hunch

THE RANGER raised his arms and turned very slowly, knowing a sudden movement might cause the girl to jerk the trigger without meaning to.

"So you didn't elope to Mexico after all," Hatfield said. "Your father will be happy to know you're back."

Trixie shook a tendril of copper hair back from her forehead. The hand holding the gun had a tremor in it that Hatfield didn't like, indicating the terrific tension she was under.

"Hal made me come here. I didn't want to. He wants to see you. I don't know why, but he trusts you."

As she spoke, the girl eased down the hammer of her gun and tipped the barrel toward the ceiling. Exhaling with relief, the Lone Wolf Ranger lowered his arms but remained standing where he was. A lengthy interval of silence built up between them.

"Where is Cavendall?" Hatfield asked finally.

The girl hesitated. "You'll promise not to —"

The Ranger cut in, "Let's get this understood fast, Trixie. I'll promise nothing where Hal Cavendall is concerned. In my

book, he is a fugitive from justice. If he has come to his sense, knows that trying to escape would condemn both of you to permanent exile over in Chihuahua, that proves his good sense—but it doesn't alter the fact that he is a jail breaker."

Trixie Rockford brought her gun back up.

"Unbuckle your guns and leave them with me, Mr. Hatfield. Then I'll tell you where Hal is."

Without comment, the Ranger removed his twin cartridge belts and tossed them and the holstered .45 Colts to the bed.

"All right, where is he?"

Trixie said, "Go down the back fire escape and head straight up the alley which leads to the tannery a block north of Main. Somewhere along that alley, Hal will contact you, as soon as he is sure you're alone and unarmed."

Hatfield's lips bent in a skeptical smile. "You say Hal Cavendall trusts me. It doesn't sound like it. I'd be a fool to head along a pitch-black alley, unheeled, knowing a—"

"You've got to do it, Jim!" the girl choked out. "Hal isn't armed, either. I swear he isn't. I wouldn't let him be, the state he's in. He might get excited and shoot the first shadow he saw."

Hatfield nodded slowly. "You're coming with me?"

She shook her head. "I'm staying here, in this room. Later, you and Hal will come back here and we'll talk this thing out. Hal isn't mixed up in Luke's death or that safe robbery, no matter what you think. He's innocent."

The Lone Wolf Ranger headed over to the door and opened it. He stood there for a moment looking across the room at Trixie Rockford, seeing the unshed tears glistening bright on her lashes, and again he felt that vague stirring of regret deep within himself that a Ranger career left no room for a girl's love, for a home and family and roots and security.

He said, very gently, "You love him more than your own happiness, don't you, Trixie?"

"If you mean sacrificing everything we've got here in Frontera to be with him, yes. But I would not be sacrificing my happiness. Without Hal, I could not be happy."

Hatfield said, "Hal Cavendall is a lucky man, to have the devotion and loyalty and trust of a woman like you, Trixie. I intend to tell him that, when I meet him in that alley."

Trixie Rockford was deeply stirred. "Then you—you believe me? You don't think Hal is guilty?"

The Ranger pursed his lips thoughtfully, thinking that one over.

"Five minutes ago," he said, "I couldn't have answered that question. Now I believe I can tell you this: I don't think Hal is mixed up in Luke Seebright's murder, or in a second murder which has been committed tonight. If I didn't think that, I wouldn't be risking my life keeping this rendezvous in a dark alley without a gun at my hip."

He stepped out into the corridor then, to hear Trixie call out anxiously: "When you get to the tannery, stop and wait. Hal may keep you there several minutes, maybe half an hour, before he dares show himself. But he won't fail us."

"*Bueno.* I'll give him plenty of time to show himself."

Not until he was several yards down the hallway did he hear the sound of muffled sobbing from his room. Trixie had finally broken.

"If my hunch pans out color," Hatfield whispered into the night, "you won't be crying over Hal tomorrow, Trixie."

GOING to the end of the corridor he stepped out onto the fire escape platform and headed down the steep, narrow stairs to the alley which dead-ended at the Oasis Hotel. And because he struck off up that black alley without looking behind him, Hatfield did not know that a crouched figure emerged from under the stairway, starlight glinting off a gun barrel.

Keeping to the middle of the ten-foot-wide alley, Hatfield headed along it, flanked by the adobe walls of a feed store

and a wheelwright's shop. He crossed a street and kept going, ending a block further on at the dead-end wall marking a tannery.

Here he sat down in the gloom to await Cavendall's coming, as he had been instructed by the girl. Minutes dragged. He heard the clock in the County Bank tower strike the hour, and the quarter hour; and it was nearly ten minutes after that that he heard footsteps approaching the tannery wall and Cavendall's voice whispered tentatively, "You there, Ranger?"

"Over here, and I'm unarmed, Cavendall."

"Trixie told you—I want to give myself up?"

Hatfield said, "Only that you wanted to see me here, that we would do our talking in my hotel room where she is."

The Wells Fargo agent, hair disheveled and his face gaunt in the starshine, lurched over to halt before the Texas Ranger.

"All I'm guilty of is runnin' out of that jail, Jim. I didn't hire Barnett over from El Paso to rob my safe."

"Then why," Hatfield asked, "did you shoot Barnett?"

Cavendall sucked a tight breath through clenched teeth. He fell back a pace, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the murk as he stared at the Ranger.

"Shoot Barnett? What are you talking about?"

Hatfield said quietly, "Barnett's dead with a bullet in his noggin, over in his jail cell. If you didn't shoot him with that Bisley .38, then Trixie Rockford did. What's the story?"

Cavendall buried his face in his hands. After a moment he said in a muffled, whispering voice: "Trixie knocked out the marshal and she unlocked my cell, Jim. No use denyin' that. And I lost my head, afraid I might get hung for a crime I hadn't committed, so I ran out of the jail with her. But Rio Barnett was alive when we left. He was screeching at Trixie to unlock his cell, too."

"What did she do with the Bisley .38 she used to knock out Oakhurst?"

Cavendall hesitated, thinking hard. "I don't rightly know. I think she left it in the jail, on Del's desk where she found it. Yes, I know she did, I remember. The gun she had when she went to your hotel room was her Dad's. She wouldn't let me tote a gun tonight. She wanted us to head for the border. We even saddled up horses and rode a mile down the Rio Grande road before I come to my senses and refused to go any further."

Jim Hatfield reached out and laid a hand on Cavendall's shoulder.

"Let's get back to my room where we can thrash this out in front of Trixie, shall we? I think we'll have this case wrapped up before this night is over—and that army money back in your safe.

Without elaborating further, Hatfield headed back along the alley toward the looming bulk of the two-story hotel. Shoulder by shoulder, they climbed the steep fire escape and entered the second story corridor. The door of Hatfield's room was opened, spilling a fanwise yellow glare of lamplight into the hall.

A moment later the two men entered the room, calling Trixie's name in unison. Hollow echoes answered them.

The room was empty. Trixie was gone.

"She must have gone over to her father's," Cavendall said shakily, "to let him know she was back. She'd left him a note sayin' we were eloping."

Hatfield's keenly analytical eyes swept the room in an instant and picked out the one false note in an otherwise undisturbed picture. Proof that Trixie had been kidnapped:

Someone had picked up a cake of soap from the dish on the washstand and had written a message on the looking glass:

> Jim—Leave town tonight or Trixie will—permanently.

Hal Cavendall had not seen the soap-writing on the mirror. Hatfield stepped over to the bed and picked up his gun belts, slapping them around his midriff and cinching the buckle-tongues to their accustomed notches.

"Let's get over to the telegraph office and send a wire to the Border Patrol at

Calendaria before we rejoin Trixie, Hal," the Ranger suggested, blowing out the lamp before the Wells Fargo man had seen the message which pointed to Trixie's having been kidnapped within the past five minutes. "I had wired them to be on the lookout for you and Trixie when you attempted to ferry the Rio Grande."

Leaving the hotel the same way they had come, by the rear fire escape stairs, Hatfield and Cavendall flanked the hotel to Main Street anad turned right, in the direction of X. T. Keele's combination telegraph office and morgue, two blocks away. From this distance, Hatfield could see the lighted windows of Keele's building.

HE MADE no mention of Trixie's absence from the room or his hunch that Cavendall's fiancee had been kidnapped as a means of forcing Hatfield to drop the case. The soaped message on the mirror had implied that Trixie would die if the warning was not heeded.

"I can't get over you telling me Barnett was murdered in his cell," the Wells Fargo man groaned, as they headed on through the night at reaching strides. "If it *was* him who stole that Army payroll, now we'll never know what he did with it."

A moment later they were marching up the steps of the Overland Telegraph office. Through the window, Hatfield could see the paunchy shape of X. T. Keele, in his shirt sleeves, seated at his telegraph bench.

"Let me do the talking here," Hatfield ordered through the corner of his mouth, opening the door and stepping inside.

X. T. Keele, a cigar stuck between his thick lips, came to his feet and stood up as the Ranger crossed the open floor to reach the counter partitioning off the telegraph table. The cigar fell from Keele's mouth as he found himself staring into the muzzle of Hatfield's .45

"Where's the girl?" Hatfield demanded

Keele blinked, his beady gaze shuttling from Hatfield to Cavendall and back to Hatfield again.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Hatfield," the coroner said, hooking thumbs in gallus straps. "What girl are you referring to?"

Hatfield said frostily, "You knew Trixie sprung Hal out of jail tonight, and you must have seen Trixie going into the hotel. After I left by way of the fire escape, you went up to my room and surprised Trixie there. You kidnapped her. You wrote that warning on the mirror—for me to drop the case and get the hell out of Frontera."

Keele did not flick an eye lash. But Hal Cavendall was staring at the tall Ranger as if he thought Hatfield had gone mad

"X. T.—kidnapped Trixie? Why would he do that?"

Without taking his eyes off X. T. Keele, the Lone Wolf Ranger said to the Wells Fargo agent, "Because X. T. Keele is the hombre who hired Rio Barnett to ride over from El Paso and rob your safe, Hal Which makes him an accomplice in the Luke Seebright murder which Barnett was forced to commit."

The color receded slowly from Keele's florid jowls, but the leering grin did not leave the man's liver-colored lips. He was a gambler who felt he held the winning cards in this game.

It was Hal Cavendall who broke the following silence. "Why, by thunder, that could be!" the Wells Fargo man gasped "All this time I been thinking I was the only one in town who knew about that $50,000 parcel coming for Fort Presido's payroll—but *you* knew about it, X. T., because you took the telegram from the Fort, telling me to ride herd on the money because the paymaster would be a couple days late picking it up."

X. T. Keele nodded. "I knew the money was in the safe, yes, being the telegrapher who handled the army's message. That doesn't mean I hired a gunslinger to rob that safe. Answer that one, Ranger, since you're such a genius."

Hatfield moved forward, reached across the counter and patted the elephantine telegraph operator under the arms and around the midriff to make certain X. T. Keele was not toting a hidden derringer.

Then he eased back, smiling grimly.

"I'm no genius," Hatfield said, "but I can prove you could have been the man who gave Barnett the combination to Cavendall's safe. For the reason that you are a former owner of that safe, Keele—a fact which Cavendall appears to have forgotten."

For the first time, concern showed its flicker in X. T. Keele's codfish eyes.

"You see, Hal," Hatfield went on, "while I was trying to unravel the puzzle of how Barnett might have come into possession of the combination to your safe, I happened to recall that the safe formerly belonged to the Pioneer Grocery."

"But that was Lige Hawkins who sold it to me," Cavendall broke in, "and he's been dead for years now."

Hatfield's smile broadened as the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle began to fall together into a coherent pattern in his mind:

"You're overlooking the fact that X. T. Keele was the original owner of the Pioneer Grocery. I happen to recall something Keele said at Bob McTavish's funeral: how the store burned down—accounting for the fact that your safe shows it had been in a fire and had been repainted, Hal—and how McTavish had loaned him the money to rebuild the store. But he sold out to this Lige Hawkins, and Hawkins was a lunger who went broke and by that time X. T. Keele was making a living as a telegraph agent and county coroner and undertaker."

Hal Cavendall shuddered. "To think," he mused, "that all these years, you could have opened my vault at any time."

Keele took a cigar from his pocket and licked its wrapper.

"I was waiting for the proper combination of events," he murmured, "before using my knowledge. When those events did shape up, it was almost like the planets lining up in a row across the sky—a once in a lifetime occurence. But consider." He began ticking off events on his stubby fingers: "A fabulous $50,000 in currency being in your safe for a two-day period only, and my having secret knowledge of that fact. My knowing the combination that would open that safe. Yes, and old Bob McTavish dying of lockjaw—that was the fuse that lit the fireworks, gentlemen. For you see, as county coroner, it was in my power to stage McTavish's funeral on the day that $50,000 would be in Hal's safe. I could hire an outsider to actually pick up the money. My own alibi was unbreakable. It was sure-fire."

THE cold, sickening realization was taking hold in Jim Hatfield that Keele wouldn't be showing his cards so readily if he didn't know he held the top hand in this deal.

"Where's Trixie?" Hatfield demanded, knowing she was Keele's trump. "If any harm has come to her, Keele, I'll let Cavendall mete out your punishment."

Cavendall staggered up to the counter, shaking a fist at the porcine telegrapher. "If you kidnapped my girl, X. T. you'll never live to buy her life with that $50,000 "

Keele recoiled until his back hit the wall. He thumbed a match alight and fired his cigar, recovering from his momentary lapse of confidence. He was smiling like a poker player with a royal flush in his hand and a high-stakes pot on the table.

Talking through the smoke, the coroner said, "Hatfield wouldn't do such an immoral thing as that, Hal. His code of ethics wouldn't permit such an unorthodox punishment. Besides, he has nothing on *me*. *I* didn't rob the safe. *I* haven't admitted to kidnapping Trixie. And I certainly haven't committed murder."

Hatfield laughed harshly. "You went into the jail office and found Oakhurst unconscious this evening," the Ranger said. "Maybe you heard Barnett hollering in the cellblock, and he told you how Trixie had sprung Hal out of jail. But you didn't let your accomplice loose, Keele. You picked up that .38 Bisley and shot Barnett between the eyes, knowing Hal would hang for the killing if he was ever captured. You'd have the fifty thousand dollars Barnett hid somewhere in the dance-

hall this afternoon—and Barnett would be another customer on a slab in the morgue next door."

Keele shrugged. "All deduction on your part. You'll not prove a word of it in court, Hatfield. One reason being that you'll never prefer charges against me."

Hatfield and Cavendall exchanged glances, knowing what Keele's ace in the hole was. Trixie.

Keele pointed to a closet door at his side. "Trixie," he said, "is inside this door. I am going to open the door to prove that fact. And then, gentlemen, I am going to tell you why you will never hail me into court, let alone arrest me and jail me tonight."

Cavendall started forward with a sharp cry, but Hatfield jerked him back with his free hand. Alert for the slightest sign of a false move, Jim Hatfield kept his gun cocked and ready as X. T. Keele took one sideways step to his left, reached out to grip the closet doorknob, and then with an eye to maximum dramatic effect, jerked the door wide open—to reveal the figure of Trixie Rockford standing with her back to the wall of the shallow closet.

In the split part of a second Hatfield saw that Trixie was gagged and blindfolded, and that her arms were trussed behind her back with dozens of turns of shiny bright Number Six copper wire.

"Trixie!" Hal choked out, starting forward, then halting as X. T. Keele slammed the door shut on Trixie again.

"Look at my left hand, gentlemen," X. T. Keele said then.

Hatfield stared at Keele's arm. While the door had been open, concealing that arm while revealing Trixie inside the closet, the telegrapher had reached over to grip the black handle of a large double-pole knife switch mounted on the wall. Wires led up the wall and into the ceiling from that switch—and another pair of on the wall next to the closet where Trixie copper wires led to stand-off insulators was imprisoned. The switch, at this moment, was open.

"If I close this switch, gentlemen," X. T. Keele said in his slurring voice, "the young lady will be instantly electrocuted. And I could close the switch merely by dropping my hold on this handle, Hatfield, in case you have any ideas of shooting me."

Knots of muscle grated at the corners of Hatfield's jaws. Keele said: "Take his guns, both of them, and lay them on the counter, Hal. Then both of you step back, hands reaching. I'm taking over now."

Indecision swirled in Hatfield as he debated whether to gun down X. T. Keele. But he could not be sure the corner was bluffing about that switch being closed automatically and putting a lethal charge of electricity through Trixie's body.

Despair was in the Lone Wolf Ranger as he realized he couldn't gamble with the girl's life. He felt Cavendall take his two guns and put them on the counter. Mutely, the two stepped back, giving Keele his chance to reach the guns safely.

Keele let go the switch handle. It snapped shut with a hum of powerful springs. Cavendall turned white

"You electrocuted her—"

Grinning, X. T. Keele picked up the sixguns which, in this moment, put him in full control of the situation.

"There was no voltage whatever in those wires, Hal," chuckled Keele. "That's my grounding device for safety during lightning storms, nothing more." Grinning, X. T. Keele opened the closet door again, showing them that Trixie was still alive; they could see the lift and fall of her breasts, hear the inarticulate efforts she made to speak behind the gag on her mouth.

"A bluff which beat Hatfield's pat hand," chuckled Keele, shutting the door. "I think I have proved that Hatfield is not unbeatable in a battle of wits. A good example of that, I think, is contained in the answer to a puzzle that has intrigued both of you this afternoon."

As he spoke, X. T. Keele came out from behind the counter to face them over leveled guns.

"If you're referring to the puzzle of the vanishing $50,000 package," Jim Hatfield said, "I'll give you the answer, Keele.

You smuggled it out of the dancehall inside Bullet Bob McTavish's coffin, intending to dig it out of boothill later on."

X. T. Keele bowed mockingly. "That's right, Jim. I bow to your superior intelligence. But how did you guess my secret?"

HAL CAVENDALL protested, "But that's impossible! Trixie said Jim searched the coffin and the body just before the coffin was nailed shut!"

Hatfield nodded. "So I did. But let's backtrack and review what happened, step by step . . . We know that Rio Barnett had the package with him when he ducked into the dancehall. He had to get rid of it, or be revealed as Luke's murderer. So, when he was turning over his Bisley .38 to his confederate, X. T. Keele, he also handed Keele the $50,000 Keele must have hidden it in the inner pocket of his Prince Albert coat. It would have been easy, in all the confusion and the lights being so dim."

To Cavendall's astonishment, Keele said "Jim's right so far. Barnett slipped the hot package to me, along with his gun."

"But," Cavendall groaned, "didn't Hatfield search *you*, too?"

"He did indeed," chuckled the coroner. "Very, very thoroughly."

"Only I searched him a minute too late," Hatfield confessed. "The answer lies in the *sequence* of events, Hal. I just now figured it out, myself. You see, I searched McTavish's corpse, and the coffin, and convinced myself the $50,000 wasn't hidden there. It wasn't—then. It was still in Keele's possession, and he hadn't been searched yet." Cavendall looked hopelessly confused.

"So," the Ranger went on, probing his memory for details, "I told Keele he could nail down the coffin lids. I went to the door and called in the pallbearers. During the moment my back was turned Keele slipped the $50,000 into the coffin and nailed down the lids. Thus, when I searched Keele a moment later, he was clean. Simple!"

"You call that simple?" Cavendall groaned.

"What say we *prove* Hatfield's story, gentlemen?" Keele suggested briskly. "I had intended waiting a few weeks, but it might as well be done tonight."

As he spoke, X. T. Keele headed over to the corner of the telegraph office and, pocketing one sixgun, sorted through a collection of tools and brought out two shovels, which he leaned against the wall by the street door.

The significance of those two shovels put adrenalin coursing through the Lone Wolf Ranger's blood.

"Pick up a shovel apiece, amigos," X. T. Keele said. "You will observe that the moon has risen. There will be plenty of light to get us up the hill to the Frontera boothill graveyard. As county coroner, I am hereby ordering the remains of the late marshal Robert Bruce McTavish exhumed. Can you guess my interest in the contents of Bullet Bob's coffin, gentlemen?"

It was nearing midnight when Jim Hatfield's shovel blade struck wood in the depths of Marshal McTavish's grave.

They had taken turns digging, he and Hal Cavendall. The sun-baked Texas gumbo which was the soil formation of this hilltop above the cowtown was ordinarily as hard as brick, but the clods were loose in a grave that had only been filled a few short hours ago.

Even so, it had taken Jim Hatfield and Hal Cavendall over three hours to excavate the three by six grave deep enough to reach the top of the interred coffin.

No one had seen them making their grim, despondent march up the hill from the Overland Telegraph office where Trixie Rockford still remained a helpless prisoner in the office closet. And the location of Bullet Bob McTavish's grave, in a far corner of the cemetery, put their gravedigging work out of sight of the twinkling lights of the town on the sage flats below.

Supervising their ghoulish task, X. T. Keele leaned his corpulent bulk against the shaft of a tombstone marking the resting place of Bullet Bob's wife, dead

nearly a quarter of a century before.

Keele's alert ears, tuned for the sound of shovel blade striking wood, knew the instant Hatfield did that the diggers had uncovered the lid of McTavish's walnut coffin.

Moving forward, keeping his gun covering Cavendall whose job it was to shovel away the dirt as fast as Hatfield hoisted it out of the grave, X. T. Keele peered down into the hole to watch the Ranger scoop dirt shovelful by shovelful away from the hardwood coffin lid.

WHEN at last the entire coffin was exposed to the moonrays which poured down from the Texas heavens, Keele tossed a hand axe into the excavation. The tool landed with an eerie clatter on the coffin lid at Hatfield's feet.

"Since we'll be refilling the grave," X. T. Keele said, "we won't bother with prying out the coffin nails. It won't be necessary to chop open both of the lids—just the one covering the lower half of the marshal's corpse, Hatfield. You'll find the package of Wells Fargo loot lying on the quilted satin coffin lining alongside McTavish's right knee."

Jim Hatfield went to work chopping at the coffin lid, knowing the noise he would make would never reach friendly ears in the town half a mile away. Nor did he believe the promise X. T. Keele had made them—that as soon as the $50,000 was safely in his hands, the coroner would be heading for Mexico, quitting Texas forever. Hatfield knew Keele intended to leave two dead men lying crumpled on top of McTavish's coffin, before he shoveled back the clods. And on the morrow, no one would ever know what had happened to Frontera's express agent and a certain visiting Texas Ranger. No one except Trixie Rockford, and she would probably be murdered before sunrise.

It was hard work, chopping open the [illegible] grave, but at length the hardwood boards gave way to the sharp hatchet and as Hatfield unpried them one by one, the eerie moonlight revealed the lower portion of the marshal's embalmed corpse, spurred cowboots and all

Hal Cavendall saw Jim Hatfield lean down and start hunting for the brown paper-wrapped parcel which had cost Luke Seebright his life. At the foot of the grave, the vulturelike shape of X. T. Keele squatted, sixgun in hand

"One moment, Ranger!" the coroner said harshly, his voice vibrant with excitement. "Toss that hand ax out, and toss it easy. I know you're planning to heave that blade at my head."

Jim Hatfield grunted. "Where did you say that package of money was? Alongside McTavish's left knee?"

As he spoke, Hatfield tossed the hand ax up on the dirt on the side of the grave opposite where Hal Cavendall stood.

"The right knee, the right knee!" X. T. Keele panted, getting down on his knees at the foot of the opened grave. "Damn it, I can see the package now—under some dirt that fell in just then from the wall of the grave."

Jim Hatfield shifted position slightly, hunkered as he was on the top half of

(Continued on page 113)

Coming in the Next Issue—

BOSS OF HANGNOOSE

An Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel

By Jackson Cole

Obregon braced the revolver in his hand and fired

THE DYING MOON

by C. S. PARK

• • •

WHEN the bead sight on the empty Colt was no longer bright, Obregon tossed the weapon into the sand beside the empty Sharp's. He stood up in the shallow depression he had hurriedly burrowed behind the mare's body, and stretched the cramps out of his muscles.

He was a tall man, wide of shoulder, ruddy-faced, with ragged honey-colored hair curling close to his head, and had very blue eyes. He was hungry, thirsty, and above all, disgusted. He could cut brush, run rod, chain, or transit from dawn to dark and then dance all night with the girls in Lamar Dismuke's Glory Hole Saloon in Tucson. But day-dreaming about them got him into this trouble.

A Harvard-taught engineer who never let danger stand in the way of a substantial fee, Gabe Obregon was en route to the Old Pueblo from thirty-one dry days of running lines for Mr. Leopold Welker's dam-building crew to follow across the Santa Ana. And, spending Welker's money in anticipation, Obregon rode smack into an ambush that even a new-

They both knew that with the dawn rush of the Apaches they would die . . .

comer to Apacheria should have been able to avoid. Only the Apaches' poor aim saved him, and the day's early nightfall.

Yet as surely as the sun would return tomorrow, so would the Indians. The past had caught up with the future. Now it was a shocking thing to realize that life and his own carelessness had led him along a short cut from which there might be no turning. But that was a quitter's philosophy, and the four Apaches lying between the mare and the mesquite fringes of the wash mutely testified that Obregon was anything but passive.

One of the bodies wore soiled pink gingham from some earlier raid.

Night was reprieve, and Obregon would have longer to live if he stayed where he was, for the superstitious Apaches preferred not to fight in a place where comrades had died. The Indians could follow a tumblebug's trail in a dust storm; but hope dies hard, and fresh water flowed in Piñon Pass, a dozen miles west.

Obregon crammed the few pieces of hardtack from the saddlebags into the spaces in his transit case, took the nearly empty canteen, and walked away from the stiffening mare toward the cleft in the Piñones beyond which the brassy sun had so conveniently dropped.

He walked a hundred yards, stopped, and came back to strip the gingham from the dead Apache. He buried the pitiful garment as deeply as the blunt shovels of his big hands could dig, stood a brief solemn moment, and then trudged west again; toting the transit in its mahogany case and the tripod, for guns were expendable, but the tools of his trade were not.

His dusty boots drew down the dry miles ahead and strung them out behind while his moon-shadow grew short before him and passed gradually to heel. Twice he made quiet detours around the faint odor of distant mesquite-wood fires. Toward the morning, he stopped to rest against a boulder in the bottom of a sandy wash, for the day ahead would be long and difficult, and Obregon would need all of his strength and his wisdom if he were to survive.

Faint regret tinged his thinking. Did a man pass from this world to the next and leave nothing behind to mark his passage? Was that all there was to it? Then he remembered that he would leave something, such as it was: "Heavenly Bodies in the Territories," a paper he had written for *The Annals of the Observatory of Harvard College*. It lay in Dismuke's safe, unfinished because he had meant to include in it observations on the lunar eclipse expected—yes, tomorrow morning.

But tomorrow was a dark unknown looming behind the vague gray shadow of today, and the only thing he could be certain of now was that the Apaches were as restless as disturbed rattlesnakes. Those he had fought off would be early on his trail, and he was in no circumstance to repel them without help. . . .

Unknown to Obregon, two hundred infantrymen of the First California under Captain Edward Reece had displaced seven hundred Apaches from narrow Piñon Pass the day before. Nine miles northwest across country grooved by deep arroyos and welted by long rounded ridges, twenty-one tired troopers under the dandified Captain John Boyd, Second Cavalry, California Volunteers, were preparing to meet a dawn attack on their bivouac. Due west of Obregon, Apaches waited in another ambush for thirteen miners whose mutilated bodies would be left to furnish buzzard feed in the shadow of the tall Piñones

The Indians had been scattered into small bands searching for trouble—and finding it. But all that is history.

OBREGON listened to the breeze stirring the dead leaves under the black branches of the mesquites, and was reassured that he could proceed for at least a little longer, undisturbed, into the cool part of this day.

Then the wind shifted slightly.

In Apache country, three things bring the cold sweat popping to a man's forehead and make him show the true color of

his feathers; the startling suddenness of an Indian attack; the choked shriek of a hurting woman; or smoke where there should be no fire.

The strong smell of smoldering oak streamed across Obregon's rough-hewn face. But the closest oak was scrub stuff in mountain canyons empty miles away across an unreliable wind.

He ghosted up the rocky wall of the arroyo, silent as a twist of morning mist in the thick mesquites.

Eastward, the valley of the Santa Ana lay blanketed in the dim remnants of night. Westward, the Piñones were piles of uneven blocks, sun-tipped with pink that washed rapidly down the sloping land as the sun climbed.

Dawn rushed the sullen shadows from a small sandy wash just below Obregon.

The smoldering oak became the axletree of a burnt-out wagon, tip-tilted behind four dead, swollen-bellied horses. The water barrel had been smashed. Household effects from the wagon had been strewn across half an acre. Bright woman's apparel waved torn tragic messages from mesquite and greasewood—unheeded distress signals.

On the gentle wind was an intermittent sound that Obregon could not at once identify. He glided to a new position slowly, and from it, saw a woman digging in the sand behind the wagon with a broken-handled shovel. Beside the hole lay a heavy man, arrows pincushioned his back. The woman dropped the shovel and tugged the body into the shallow grave. She knelt. Obregon turned away from her private sorrow to concentrate upon the distances.

A remote movement in the west caught his attention. It might have been a herd of deer feeding across a far ridge where isolated mesquites against dead grass looked like tufts of green yarn on a yellow quilt. He swept the transit from the case, braced it against his eye, and in the telescope, the faraway jumped near for his inspection. The movement had not been made by deer.

Between Obregon and the Pass, six Apaches rode the slanting ground behind one who wore a shirt that made a bright spot of crimson against the changing colors of the Piñones. They were an hour away.

Replacing the transit and observing that the woman was filling the grave, Obregon flitted downslope with the case under one arm and the tripod riding like a lance under the other. At the rear of the wagon the woman whirled to face him, poised, frightened but holding steady, the shovel lifted. Sudden relief cleared the lines of fear from her dusty oval face and made it young.

She stood to Obregon's thorough scrutiny boldly enough, but as it drew longer, her fingers plucked uncertainly at the inadequate cloth of her torn blue dress.

Dirty or not, Obregon decided, the finest of the Glory Hole's bathed and perfumed beauties did not come as well-equipped and appealing as this small, disheveled female. She was put together as neatly and prettily as a brick birdhouse. Her black hair hung across her shoulders in two glossy braids, and her eyes were soft brown, with the shadow of shock within them.

Obregon pulled the canteen strap over his head, unscrewed the lid, and passed what was left of the water to her.

"All the women I ever knew would be putting miles between themselves and here," he said.

Her voice was low-pitched and said, "Apaches jumped us late yesterday." And because her presence called for explanation, she gave it. "My horse ran until he fell. Then I ran." It was as though she confessed to crime, yet her mind was not wholly upon that.

Obregon nodded toward the west. "Apaches followed your trail until dark. They stopped only because an Apache has no stomach for night fighting." And Apaches favored odds of seven to two, he was thinking. Somewhere along his back trail an unknown number followed. When they met with the party from the west and compared notes—

She swished the water in the canteen, listening to the story of its lack. The struggle against tilting and draining it was there in her eyes, but beyond that were other troubled thoughts. She took a careful swallow and handed the canteen back.

"Two months married is not long enough to forget the words, or even to know your man," she said slowly, giving Obregon a hint of her pain.

In sickness and in health. Was that part of it? Was she distressed now because she had deserted her husband, instead of standing by him? Would that memory always be with her to show in her eyes and the lines of her face?

Obregon said, "What has been has been. Why come back at all?" and wet his lips with the water.

Her lips drooped. "To bury him." Wearily, she looked up. "His name was Frank Loyd. Mine is Lily."

Obregon blocked an impulse to pet a smudge of dirt from the bridge of her nose with a gentle finger. Instead, he said, "Gabe Obregon here."

She nodded, and let him know she was aware of their danger when she said, "How long have we got before they find us, Gabe?"

He lidded the canteen and slung it over his shoulder. "That depends on how soon they guess you were headed back here instead of being lost," he said gently "We'll get a good start."

Her eyes strayed to the mound of fresh-turned sand. "That was what Frank wanted. A start, in Tucson." She looked back at Obregon. "Is there any use, trying to get away?"

Obregon's teeth were white and strong in his craggy face. "I should say so! A dozen girls are waiting in Tucson for me! I can't disappoint them."

Her dry lips parted in surprise and shock, but her mind was away from sorrow and perhaps occupied with anger at his levity She said stiffly, "I won't hold you back, Mr. Obregon. I am ready to leave."

Apaches blocked their way to water in Piñon Pass. But in the valley between the Piñones and the short string of the Millstones, there was Paradise Sink. Stinking Water, the Indians called it; a warm sulphur spring beneath a high round ridge. If they could stay ahead of the Apaches that far, they would find the stuff as tasty as chilled champagne. Beyond water, Obregon did not try to think.

From the corner of his eye he watched how stubbornly the Loyd woman kept at his heels, walking in a free stride that would consume the rough miles. He estimated their handicap in the coming race, and increased his pace accordingly

THIS was the year of the mad skunks, but most would recall it as the year of drought. Dependable seeps were bowls of fine dust. Animals traveled so far from feed to water that they were nothing but racks of bone in loose sacks of hide. This was also the year that marauding Apaches forced the abandonment of Benteen Springs, Garnett, Gurleyville, and even Fort Bridge. Settlers moved from their land to Tucson, yet even there the Apaches ran off horse herds in broad daylight and cut the throats of pastured milk cows at night. It was a year when only the hardy—or foolhardy—ventured out at all.

Civil War, not Apaches, brought the military to the territory. Captain John Boyd's troopers had suffered only one casualty during that day. But it had been a serious one. Buff Pierson was down with an arrow piercing his groin and his moans growing weaker by the hour. A hundred Apaches had them pinned to the rocks where they had bivouacked.

The part-Papago scout, Jim Lillevig, said, "It's like they was only tryin' to hold us here whilst they did some devilment elsewhere they don't want us to know about."

He stared with small black eyes at tough little Sergeant Van Hutton, who was watching Boyd. Van Hutton said, "We could move out after dark."

Boyd showed the irritation he was chafing under. "I had a date in Tucson. These rascals have fixed that now—with

Pierson unable to move."

Hutton swiveled at the hips and spat into the dust. Boyd snorted and turned to his blanket, spread in the shade of the only mesquite in the tangle of rocks. "If anything unusual occurs," he said, "call me."

There were two other travelers abroad in the region on that day besides the military, Lily Loyd, and Gabe Obregon: Earl Pulis and Royall Robb—there was a pair to draw to—were on their way from Fort Howell to Tucson. The sutler's whisky was gone from the canteens, and the taste and feel of dry fur was in their mouths. Paradise Sink was on their path. They arrived incautiously, dismounted hurriedly, and drank too thoroughly of the stinking water. Pulis, sickened, retched wetly, crawled weakly under a mesquite and promptly slept. Robb, none too well himself, sat against the bole of another tree with his new—stolen—Wesson rifle across his legs. He cursed his partner until his own drowsiness overcame him. . . .

South of the Sink, Obregon and the new widow plodded north across the scorched land, stumbling up the deep scars of ancient erosion, following the tufa reefs and sandstone outcrops to lessen the marks of their passage and delay their trackers. The wind dwindled and died. The sun changed from a fat insipid butterball to a burning white disk boring through the little dust cloud that paced them. Drifting dirt worked under their eyelids. Heat cracked their lips. And admiration for this small woman grew in Obregon.

Four times he climbed the round brown hills to study their back trail, and always she was on her feet and ready to go when he came down. Finally, he had to force the march, for the water was long gone from the canteen, the moisture drawn from their bodies, and the Indians by now would have guessed their destination.

Three miles below the Sink, Obregon saw the fresh prints of shod hoofs and felt immediate relief. Shod horses meant white men. White men meant help.

Lily was walking so close that she stumbled against him as he stopped and turned. He caught her to keep her from falling.

"Water?" Her lips moved against his dusty shoulder. Her voice was a dry croak.

"It's near."

"Apaches?"

He let her go, headed her in the right direction, and strode past to lead her. "We'll make it."

They did, too, but in no orthodox manner. Obregon half-carried her for the last quarter-mile, and they came off the ridge to the water in a shambling run.

Robb heard them and parted gummy lids to stare through bleared eyes while Obregon eased the girl down beside the water and shrugged off the transit's carrying-strap. Lily's lashes lay like muddy half-moons against her dirty white cheeks. Obregon dribbled water from cupped hands on her cracked lips before he scooped a careful handful for himself.

Robb, swaggering to cover his illness, walked in close to stand over them and stare at the girl. His eyes were furtive. "What's wrong with her?"

Obregon dropped a measured bit of water into Lily's mouth before he looked around. "Walked out—dried out. Apaches are fifteen minutes behind us."

Lily coughed and sat up. Her tongue came out to touch the moisture still on her lips. Robb unconsciously copied the gesture. His little eyes, windows into his small soul, scuttled away from Lily's legs to his hipshot animal resting over dropped lines. He mumbled something about filling canteens, walked stiffly to the horse, and swung into the saddle. His color had faded to a sick gray. Twice he tried to speak before the words came.

"You brought the Apaches! You fight 'em off!"

He spurred the startled horse, gravel scattered under pounding hoofs, but the reek of Robb's nervous sweat remained to mingle with the sulphurous stink of the water after he had vanished.

Obregon carefully watched Pulis crawl on hands and knees from under the mes-

quite. Pulis got up, swearing violently. Obregon finished filling his canteen, stood, and stared across the sandy ground between them until Pulis closed his mouth.

A rasping, pain-filled cry drifted from distance and faded away into vast silence. Pulis tilted his head. "That's Robb!"

Obregon said softly, "He rode right into Apaches," and continued to stare at Pulis.

Swearing again, Pulis ran to his horse in great, staggering steps. He jerked the animal around and climbed on, shouting, "I'll not make that mustake!"

Obregon scooped up the transit tripod and hurled it underhand. The tri-pronged javelin hit Pulis's shoulder and knocked him off the horse.

His boot hung-up in the stirrup. The disturbed animal kicked. There was a noise like the hull of a ripe watermelon splitting, the foot pulled sucking out of the boot, and the horse stepped daintily sidewise and stood steady over the dragging lines.

Pulis lay still.

UNEASY silence settled in the Sink. Down-canyon, a jay yammered raucously and was joined by others. A high thin dust drifted, almost invisible, above the mesquites.

Obregon said, "The Apache horse herd. The Indians will move up on foot to make sure that the odds are all theirs before they attack. We won't be here when they come."

He raced to Pulis' body, and transferred the man's revolver to his own belt, recovered the tripod, angled across to Robb's forgotten rifle, eased up to the saddle of Pulis' horse, and doubled back to Lily.

She stood ready with the transit case slung over her shoulder and the wet muddy canteen dripping. She was pale but briefly rested, and turning as he loped up, lay into the curve of his reaching arm and whirled up behind the saddle like a circus performer. Pulis' horse ran at the sloping ridge.

Aeons of wind and rain had left a crown of jutting rock in a broken jumble thrusting out of the ridge above. Four hundred and fifty yards, Obregon judged, and they had plunged upward more than half that way before the Apaches spilled into the waterhole below them and charged the brown slope. Flattened lead snipped its vicious way through the dry grass, screaming above the roar of gunfire, the shrill triumphant yells, and the pounding hoofs. Dust of a near miss spurted over Obregon and Lily Loyd.

Then the silent death, traveling low, a driven splinter of light, glanced against the transit case bouncing on Lily's back and caromed down into Obregon's thigh. He felt the blow tying the long muscles there in violent cramp and knew he was arrow-pierced before he felt the warm flow of blood. And just short of the safety of the rocks, the straining horse went down.

They tumbled among the tufa boulders in a tangled, intimate embrace. Lead whispered in gently murderous deceit above them, and frustrated, searched among the rocks in shrieking, angry ricochet. The horse, struck repeatedly, moaned and thrashed and grew quiet.

The firing stopped. Lily lay in an exhausted heap where she had fallen. The shocking arrow had sapped the strength from Obregon, but he hoisted himself and peered down the ridge, where the careful Apaches were loping back to the waterhole

As Obregon turned to Lily, the arrow in his leg struck rock. He converted an involuntary hiss of pain into: "It's the Apache way, they can afford to wait for reinforcements."

He sat down quickly, both hands gripping his thigh. If that arrowhead had been dipped into a brew of rattlesnake heads and squashed scorpions, he wouldn't last long.

Lily pushed herself up, staring at the spreading crimson stain on his pantsleg. She shuddered. But she bent to examine the arrow more closely

She said then, "They can afford to wait for reinforcements, but we can not. So grab a rock, grit your teeth, and put your mind to those dozen girls pining for you

in Tucson—this arrow comes out now!"

All of Obregon's shirt and part of Lily's already scanty dress went to bind up the injured leg. Toward the tail of that long afternoon, Obregon limped around the perimeter of their natural fortress. Most of the rocks were breast high, surrounding a little crater of decomposed tufa. On south, west, and north, smooth red earth sloped away, furnishing no cover, to the bend of a wide, sandy wash. To the east, that side toward the waterhole, lay their greatest danger. Gray boulders hugged low and dark into the grass, with occassional clumps of gramma, among which a crawling Apache could work his way upward undetected

Fifty yards down the ridge there was movement. Obregon drew Pulis's revolver slowly. Lily walked softly over to stand beside him. He pushed the gun across a rock and stared along the barrel. But the distance was too great to risk a shot with the sidearm.

The sun, a big orange fireball in the western sky, balanced on the blue Atascosas and then slid behind them. Evening's shadow slid swiftly down the slope. Obregon listened to the little breeze, trying to isolate any crackle of dry grass breaking from it and the slight humming that was in his ears. A clump of gramma to the right of a near boulder bent suddenly against the wind. Obregon fired.

A broad-shouldered Apache, naked limbs churning, lurched half his length toward the yellow sky like a striking rattler. A gout of blood spurted from his chest, glinting redly in the day's last light. He plunged back to earth, and one corded arm rammed stiffly upward with a long knife in the clenched fist. Then he lay limp, partially hidden and unmoving, behind the gramma grass and the boulder.

The flat echo of the shot returned to the peak. To the right and left of the Apache, four others sprang up and ran out of pistol range, twisting and dodging.

LILY leaned weakly against the rocks, her head for a moment resting on her arm. Obregon blew gently across the muzzle of the gun, thinking, one bullet, one Apache, and would not imagine beyond the point where their small store of ammunition would be gone.

He said, "That will make them leave us alone for awhile." But he kept careful watch below while night's dimness dulled vision. When he could no longer see clearly, when the early moon pushed its arched top above the eastern skyline in unbelievable yellow largness, he turned stiffly. On the updraft from the waterhole there arose the rich sweet odor of roasting meat.

Lily's hunger was not a thing she could keep from her face, and Obregon hobbled away so not to have to look at it. But he said, and hoped it might help to assuage the pangs of an empty stomach, "Apaches ride their dinner to death and then eat it. That's mule-meat you smell."

He sat on the ground and opened the transit case. Lily moved up to stand by his shoulder, and he offered her crumbs of hardtack in sombre silence. She sat beside him, and they munched together, using a teaspoonful of the evil-smelling tepid water to clear their dry throats.

And finally Lily said, "Mule or mutton or hardbread, what is the difference if you cannot get beef?" and took Obregon's slow small grin with a faint answering twist to the curve of her lips.

Shortly, Obregon hitched to his good leg and stared down to see what the Indians were up to. His mind remained upon Lily for the moment—she was no puny flower, but a sturdy plant. She had taken all the bumps like a brave man.

And now Obregon, with the pain of his wound to irk him, and the fatigue heavy in his brain, felt the touch of pessimism at last—to what avail bravery? There could be only one end now, either his wound and their thirst-madness would get them, or the Apaches would.

The Indians were eating and listening to one who wore a black straight-brimmed hat and a brilliant red shirt that hung almost to the tops of his *chivarras*. His guttural sing-song drifted up the ridge. From shadow behind Obregon,

Lily said softly, "He must be a chief. He led those who rushed us yesterday," and said on in seeming irrelevance, "Does it need danger to show a person for what he *really* is?"

She might have meant Robb and Pulis, but then Obregon recalled the arrows in Frank Loyd's back. He gave that memory careful thought before he said, "Even strong men sometimes panic, Lily." and drew Robb's new Wesson rifle to him, laid it across a rock, and squinted downhill along the sights.

Lily said, "Frank was big and strong and you could think that always meant courage. Yet when the Apaches struck, he ran like a—" She shook her head, and her dusty braids danced in the moonlight. "I guess he couldn't help it."

No condemnation there, Obregon thought, and couldn't find it in himself to be so charitable. He would never have returned to the wagon to bury a coward who had thought more of his own safety than of his wife's.

The breeze gusted once and stopped. Off the end of the rifle barrel, a tiny target black against the fire, the red-shirted speaker ran a few steps up the slope and patted his bared backside. The Apaches around the fire shouted their own threats upward.

Obregon said, "Apaches don't have chiefs, Lily. Any man able to make simple medicine can lead them. To their death—" he fitted the rifle stock snugly against his shoulder—"or to ours!" and pulled the trigger.

The black hat rolled in the firelight and the red shirt was downed motion, beating itself furiously out upon the ground.

"One for Frank Loyd," Obregon said, and counted to twenty-nine as the Apaches boiled up around the fire and slipped into the mesquite. Twenty-nine! The coyotes were arriving for the kill!

Lily's face was white, her eyes wide and dark. "That was an impossible shot!"

Obregon said, "The only way to teach an Apache respect." He leaned the gun against the rock and came around. "Even a shot in the dark is possible with a good weapon."

His ears were still ringing from the report. He shook his head to clear them, and was abruptly dizzied. He sat down suddenly, jarring the injured leg. The route of the arrow burned like a red-hot rod of half-inch iron. Coolness had gone from the night air. His skin felt dry and stiff. Lily's concerned eyes were upon him, but for the moment he was too weak to speak, only strong enough to think.

Of what use was the finest of rifles now that it is empty?

Finally he said, "They will not attack tonight," but was not at all sure that his voice carried conviction.

A SUDDEN chill rattled him. His chattering teeth sounded like dried peas shaken in a gourd. He laid over on his side, curling in on himself, trying to fight off the bone-cold. He was only half aware that Lily crawled inside the clutch of his arms against his chest to give him all the warmth she had—that of her body. Time swept by in a gray tide, but gradually the tremors left, and his mind cleared. In the moonlight, Lily's face under his chin resembled that of a small, sad, and very dirty child. Exhaustion had made its claims upon her; once when she cried out softly in her sleep, he comforted her gently, and found confusion within him.

After a time his muscles ached for a change of position, and he moved carefully away and pulled himself up to stare over the rocks. He was startled to observe that while he had slept, Apaches had removed the body of the one he had pistolled. Yet this was in keeping: Apaches buried their dead at night, and it was rare for them to attack after dark.

But on the slope a hundred yards below, something moved, subsided, moved again. Scanning the ridge, Obregon saw similar motion elsewhere. The Apaches were closing in!

The moon was low in the west! More than half the night had gone. This, then, was the advance before the dawn attack!

How much time, Obregon thought, have we got left?

He glanced up to make his calculation from the moon's position. A black shadow had dug an arc out of the full bright globe!

The eclipse!

In Obregon's fever-bright mind, from the possible effect upon the Apaches to a desperate gamble was only a quick slurring step. Something more than temperature made him tremble. Excitement stimulated him as he turned away from the rocks and crawled along the sharp-cutting gravel, with his stiffened leg a useless dragging anchor holding him back, to fumble until he found the transit case. His fingers wrapped around the telescope like a physical manifestation of the way his mind had enveloped his flashing idea.

Weakness loosened the fibres of his muscles and melted the cartilage hinging his joints. Tremors shook him as he mounted the transit on the tripod and braced the whole thing on the rocky ramparts. He pointed the black tube of the telescope at the moon, and then forced his shivering hands to draw two charges from Pulis's revolver and spill the powder in a sloppy pile under the tripod.

Any man able to make simple medicine can lead them!

Images of witches and gobblins and evil genii hunched black above steaming cauldrons of noxious mixtures danced inside Obregon's feverish skull. The ghost wind crept up from the south and the moon's light died along the slope as the eclipse progressed inexorably, and the Apaches paused in their stealthy approach to peer from the pointing transit to the moon-ball where darkness bit deeper into that brilliant circle. And now with his neck corded in effort and the wildness of wolves crowding his throat, Obregon spawned a barking, whimpering howl that was nothing earthly. It brought the short hairs on his own neck a-bristling, and jerked Lily rudely from her deep sleep with each nerve vibrating like a taut fiddle string.

Obregon dragged a match along the rock and dropped it beside the spilled powder. The stuff ignited with a flash that etched the tripod and pointing telescope black against white glare and spread quick light to pick out crooked branches of the mesquites far beyond the Stinking Water. And the lonely echo of Obregon's hideous wail crept up from below.

Down the slope there was the startled sound of indrawn breath, and sharp rapid gutturals. In the fading moon-glow an Apache materialized so uncomfortably near that Obregon raised the revolver.

The Apache shouted in alarmed Spanish, "What are you doing?"

In all the taunting arrogance he could force, Obregon shouted back: "The little cannon kills the moon and when the sun comes will kill it too! For Great Medicines do not fight with the weapons of men!"

A dozen questioning voices raised against the peak and beat down into the canyons and came echoing faintly back. The crouched interpreter stood more nearly erect and shouted in reply. Then a great moan rocked the hillside, fading into shocked silence.

Earth's shadow slid ponderously across the face of the moon, and now Obregon brought out the final part of his gamble and played it for whatever it might be worth. He said gently into the tightened quiet: "Go, and I will restore life to the bleeding moon! Go, and if all are gone when the sun returns, the sun can live, too. And so can you!"

The Apache mind is quick and guileful, but where a thing can not be understood, fear and superstition find fertile ground. The moon hung there like a great ball of ancient copper, low in the western sky, and all about the Stinking Water was nothing but the stillness of death. It held —while Obregon and Lily stood shoulder to shoulder in tortured waiting—until the white moon began again to peer out around Earth's shadow, and as the light slowly came back to the peak, the Apaches faded down from it, their frightened wondering voices straying briefly behind

and then drifting off on the freshening breeze. There was the confusion of thudding hoofs, snorting horses, and then these went to murmurs of sound and finally no noise at all reached the peak except the chuckle of gramma stalks tickling each other in the growing windy morning.

THAT dawn's wind lifted the brim of Sergeant Hutton's hat as he knelt and shook Captain Boyd awake. "Lillevig's got it figured out, sir," he said.

Boyd grumbled, "It took him long enough," and sat up on his blanket.

"Apaches ain't easy to figure," Lillevig turned his head and spurted snuff juice into the morning's darkness. "Awhile back, I seen something to straighten it out —big flash on the peak behind the Stinkin' Water." He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Somebody's in trouble, an' this bunch here's been holdin' us down so's we couldn't find out about it."

Boyd stared at Hutton. "I'm not going to sacrifice men for any scatter-brained prospector who hasn't the sense to hole up until this Apache thing is over." But the answering silence weighed upon him, and finally he said complainingly, "Well, what do you say, Sergeant?"

"It can be done, sir."

"Through these Apaches?"

Lillevig laconically observed, "There ain't no Apaches." He pointed upward where the moon, leaving the umbra, was half-visible. "Hutton here is educated, and he says loony e-clipses happen ever once in awhile. Me, I'm thirty-seven an' never seen anything like it, an' even knowin' what makes it still leaves me a little spooked. But them Apaches out there don't have nobody to explain it. They're gone, or they have their heads so deep in the sand a naked white woman could walk right through them and they wouldn't even turn around to stare."

Hutton said again, "It can be done, sir."

Boyd said abruptly, "All right, Sergeant! There are no naked women around here that I know of, but take five men and have a look."

Going away from Boyd, Lillevig cackled low. "Gave him somethin' to think about, didn't we, Sarge?"

They rode quietly out of the bivouac area, rode right over the glowing coals of a mesquite fire unchallenged. "Gone," Lillevig grunted.

They deployed around the waterhole at Paradise Sink and the dawn brought visibilty.

"Apaches have been an' gone here, too," Lillevig said.

It was Lillevig who spotted the tripod thin on the peak above. Hutton led the detachment up on the slope, and hallooed the peak as they closed. He jerked his horse up in surprise as Lily stepped out from the rocks.

Lillevig said, "Cap'n sure missed the boat this time. If she ain't naked she's the next thing to it." He dismounted, and went around her into the rocks. He knelt to look at Obregon's swollen leg, his bright eyes, and hear his slurred muttered words.

Hutton put his shirt around Lily's shoulders and they came to stand above Lillevig. Hutton said, "The man's delirious."

Lillevig turned his shrewd Indian eyes up at Lily. "Maybe. Maybe not. Sounds to me like he's makin' sense. He's sayin' a man sure don't need a dozen women when he finds one with *all* their qualities."

He stood up and handed Lily his small canteen and stepped back, so that she could come in close, lifted Obregon's head gently and dribble the cool water onto his parched and reaching lips.

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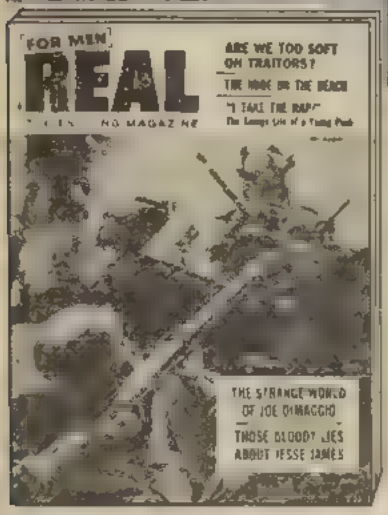
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WYATT EARP
MAN OF IRON

The marshal of Tombstone faced some of the toughest gunmen in a tough era and made them all back water or die reaching

WYATT EARP who [illegible] of the Old West [illegible] the [illegible] the entertainment media. He was [illegible] was up to and perhaps exceeded the [illegible] who have since portrayed him.

Earp was born at Monmouth Illinois March 19 1848 His father a cavalry captain

Clay Allison wheeled his horse with a yell, drew his gun and bore down at full speed on the unmounted and unmoving Wyatt

by LAURAN PAINE

in the Mexican War, named the boy for his wartime commander Colonel Wyatt Berry Stapp, thus Wyatt's full name was Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp.

Wyatt's early life was colorful. He was a teamster, a freighter, a buffalo hunter, and an Indian fighter. He was also a quarter of an inch over six feet tall and in his prime weighed under one hundred and fifty pounds. Thin and stringy, he had none of the coarseness of muscle which made for exceptional strength and which also made for sluggish reflexes. Lean, perfectly coordinated, possessed of the clearness of eye and the uninhibited mentality which allowed each nerve, each muscle, and every basic instinct to mesh perfectly, Wyatt Earp was a natural-born gunfighter.

In 1871 Wyatt, footloose after being paid off as armed-guard and professional hunter for a surveying party, went to Kansas City and there gravitated toward Market Square where the accomplished frontiersmen of genuine merit foregathered. Here he listened and learned, saw the exhibitions of shooting, heard the lessons and heeded them, from such famous men as Wild Bill Hickok, Jack Gallagher, Billy Dixon, Tom O'Keefe, Tom Speer, Old Man Keeler, Bermuda Carlisle, and others. Especially, the remarks of Jack Gallagher impressed him. He learned that no gunfighter with an ounce of sense went in for the flashy tricks, much later displayed with such dazzling brilliance in motion pictures; that when your life was at stake you aimed well and shot fast, but you did not lessen your chances to reach eighty by any foolishness.

Being practical by nature Wyatt remembered those lessons all his life. That he lived to be eighty proves that he didn't deviate from what those who knew, told him. He once said: "I learned to take my time in a gunfight, I do not wish to be misunderstood, for the time to be taken was only that split-fraction of a second that means the difference between deadly accuracy with a sixgun and a miss. It is hard to make this clear to a man who has never been in a gunfight . . . I can best describe such time-taking as going into action with the greatest speed of which a man's muscles are capable, but mentally unflustered by an urge to hurry or the need for complicated nervous and muscular actions which trick-shooting involves."

There, in a paragraph, is the secret which enabled Wyatt Earp to reach eighty and pilgrimage through some incredible gun battles to get there.

Another contributing factor of course was his outlook. Bat Masterson, another famous oldtimer, said of Earp: "Wyatt was a shy young man with few intimates. With casual acquaintances he seldom spoke unless spoken to. He had the most even disposition I ever saw; I never knew him to lose his temper. He was more intelligent, better educated, and far better mannered than the majority of his associates, which probably did not help them to understand him. I think his outstanding quality was the nicety with which he gauged the effort and time for every move. That, plus his absolute confidence in himself, gave him the edge over the run of men."

That was the Wyatt Earp who later went to fame in the cowcamps and frontier towns. He learned from Jack Gallagher and Hickok, and through constant daily association and practice with guns —pistols, carbines, rifles, shotguns—first as a hunter, later among men like Hendry Brown (who afterward made a fortune as one of the greatest horsethieves of the West) Wyatt Earp trained his mind and body to gunmanship

In April, 1873, Wyatt left the buffalo ranges with several thousand dollars in his pockets and an unquestioned superiority as a gunman. He had an urge to see the new towns which were springing up to accommodate the Texas herds then forging north, east and west, in search of markets for the wicked-horned cattle that had multiplied by the thousands during the Civil War.

With these hundreds of thousands of wild cattle came cowboys just as wild and twice as deadly. Texicans, Tejanos,

Texans, whatever they were called they were the big-mouths of the Lone Star State with guns and guts and a smouldering antipathy for anything "Yankee." They grew wilder as they went too, until the designation "Texan" was a synonym for trouble from the headwaters of the Green to the muddy Rio Grande, and south. Texans boasted that any Texas horse could buck and any Texas man could shoot.

For all their cantankerousness though, Texas cattle and Texas men brought something to the frontier that no one has found too much fault with yet: money. Hundreds of thousands of Texas cattle brought millions of Yankee dollars. The frontier boomed, prices skyrocketed, anything was for sale and life was very, very cheap.

WYATT EARP rode through the hell-roaring towns and marveled. He went to Ellsworth, Kansas, and on a sizzling August afternoon in 1873 he was lazing under the overhang of Beebe's General Store when the Thompson brothers, Ben and Bill, notorious gunmen—Texas-men in the best traditions although transplanted Englishmen by birth—got into a fight in Brennan's Saloon next to Beebe's store. A man named Sterling slapped Bill Thompson's face. Thompson jumped up and Sterling knocked him down. Bill and Ben Thompson then rushed outside, took a stand behind a haywagon, daring the men inside Brennan's to come out and fight.

Sheriff Whitney of Ellsworth came up where Wyatt was lounging and asked what was going on. Wyatt told him he didn't know and pressed himself flat in a doorway. Sheriff Whitney then walked over to the Thompsons and tried to talk them out of fighting. They were adamant. Whitney then went into the saloon, discovered that Sterling was gone, returned to where the Thompsons were and invited them inside for a drink. All three men went inside and Wyatt, confident the fracas was over, started back for his seat in the shade.

A little later Sheriff Whitney came out of Brennan's Saloon, walked as far as where Wyatt sat, then Bill Thompson, five feet eight, stocky of build, burst through the saloon's doors with a shotgun, cried out he'd get a sheriff anyway, and fired pointblank at Whitney. The sheriff went down.

Thompson's followers boiled out of the saloon. Other Texas men erupted from other buildings and while Sheriff Whitney's friends carried him away the Thompson brothers proceeded to curse the town and everyone in it, daring one and all to come out and fight. None came. Ben told his brother he had shot the sheriff to which Bill replied: "I know it and if it'd been Jeezuz Chriz' I'd of shot him, too!" Ben urged his brother to flee but kill-crazy Bill refused. He paraded up and down shouting curses and challenges.

Wyatt watched all this. He also watched the reluctance of the Ellsworth peace officers to face the Texas men, many of whom weren't only notorious gunmen but were also well liquored up. After a short while Ben got Bill on a horse headed out of town. By then Wyatt had been handed a lawman's badge by Mayor Miller, who couldn't get the duly constituted lawmen to do much, and Wyatt had his first marshal's job all cut out for him: arrest Ben Thompson or kill him, in the face of maybe a hundred other Texas men, all itching to kill someone.

Wyatt went into a store and borrowed two second-hand sixguns, two well-worn holsters and shell-belts, armed himself and went out into the shimmering afternoon. Ben Thompson watched him approach and Wyatt's step never faltered, his eyes never wavered. When he was just about within range of Ben's scattergun Wyatt stopped and ordered Ben to toss aside the scattergun. Ben Thompson knew Wyatt Earp only slightly, but he said afterward that he knew from Wyatt's approach and expression that Earp was not bluffing.

Ben began to talk. From that moment Wyatt knew he had him. Gunfighters don't talk, they shoot. Wyatt told Ben

he'd kill him or take him prisoner, the choice was Ben's. He repeated the order to drop the gun. Ben obeyed. Wyatt disarmed him completely and marched Ben Thompson to the justice court. When Ben's friends rushed in Wyatt told them to get out, and fast. The Texas men got.

Ben Thompson was fined twenty-five dollars for "disturbing the peace" and turned loose. Sheriff Whitney died shortly afterwards.

Wyatt was offered the sheriff's job. He declined with a dry comment that he wasn't interested in working for a town that valued sheriffs at twenty-five dollars a head, returned the borrowed guns, saddled up and rode out of Ellsworth, Kansas

He went back to buffalo hunting but by 1874 the bison market was pretty well saturated with hides, the animals too scattered, thinned out, for big profits and Wyatt turned his horse toward another Kansas town, a place called Wichita where his brother, Jim, was working

Wyatt found his brother and he also found that Ben and Bill Thompson with their Texans were in town. In fact, the Texas men were raising hell and using Witchita to prop it up with. Among them was George Peshaur who had boasted he would kill Wyatt Earp for what had happened over in Ellsworth. Of course Jim Earp had heard this and told Wyatt of Peshaur's fight-talk

However, before Peshaur and Wyatt met Wyatt got hit in the face by a man named Doc Black who was beating his stableboy when Wyatt interferred. Wyatt then took Black on in earnest, smashed his nose and blacked both his eyes and Black had Wyatt arrested for assault Earp was taken to an old shack which served a Wichita's jail and there, in company with a friendly deputy, he languished.

The Texans of course heard of Wyatt's entrance into town and his fight with Doc Black. Remembering the Ellsworth insult they stormed to the shack and demanded that Wyatt come out. He refused and swore he'd kill the first man through the door. It was pure bluff because he wasn't armed but it worked. The Texans went away. Later, the Texans forgot Wyatt long enough to kill a Negro who had whipped two of them in a fist fight, and Wichita was simmering. Wyatt's guard went for help, fearing the Texans would return. Before leaving he gave Wyatt his guns

Wyatt promptly quit the shack, went to the livery barn and hid in a stall that commanded an excellent view of the back alley and Douglas Avenue out front. While watching both ways Wyatt saw Marshal Smith approaching. He hailed him, learned of the Negro's killing and was told to stay where he was until Smith returned. Smith then accosted the Texans and told them they could keep their guns if they'd stop using them. The Texans agreed to this.

Smith returned to the barn, got Wyatt in tow and headed for the mayor's office where two Town Fathers and Mayor Jim Hope were waiting. Hope asked Wyatt if he were the man who had taken the slack out of Ben Thompson over in Ellsworth Being answered in the affirmative, Hope then asked Wyatt if he'd accept the job of deputy marshal of Wichita, said the job paid twenty-five a month, guns and ammunition. Wyatt told the Town Fathers he had several thousand dollars in his britches and the money didn't interest him but, well—yes, he'd take the job. Then he said:

"How far can I go in making the ordnances stick?"

"The limit," Jim Hope answered.

Wyatt took the badge.

THE Texans naturally resented Wyatt's emergence from the major's office wearing a badge instead of a jail sentence for belting the whey out of Doc Black. Doc likewise took a dim view of this but he was far wiser than the Texans; he let it pass.

But the Texans then had trouble screwing up their nerve. The fall shipping season wasn't in full swing just yet so the Texans made a lot of war-talk and threats

but avoided Wyatt until the plains beyond Wichita had herds numbering close to half a million longhorns, and Texans numbering close to two thousand, of which many were professional killers, gunfighters, and general go-to-hell boys. Then, quite unexpectedly Ben Thompson appeared in Witchita hunting for Wyatt. They met and Ben told Wyatt that the Texans were after his hide but that he, Ben, held Wyatt no ill will over the Ellsworth affair. This meeting occurred an hour or so after George Peshaur and several other staggering-drunk Texans accosted Wyatt on Douglas Avenue and told him they were going to kill him. Wyatt told them they were drunk and walked away

Then Wyatt made his preparations to fight an army. He loaded shotguns and left them cached strategically throughout town. Trouble wasn't long in coming. One sparkling day Shanghai Pierce, six feet four and two hundred pounds of transplanted Yankee turned Texas cattle king, got rip-roaring drunk and threatened to kill anyone who annoyed him.

Wyatt was sent for. He found Pierce bleary-eyed drunk, called him, took his gun away from him and booted him into Billy Collins's Saloon with the admonition that if Shang had any friends in there they'd better keep Pierce toned down or he'd be thrown into jail. This stunned the Texans into howling indignation.

Under the aegis of Ed Morrison, notorious gunfighter, the Texans waylaid Wyatt with drawn, cocked guns. They blessed Wyatt to a frazzle for a while then backed away bearing Shanghai Pierce—too drunk to walk by himself—with them. Wyatt waited until they were gone, then ducked through a store, grabbed up one of his cached shotguns and emerged on the back street just as the howling Texans came roaring up. He threw up his shotgun and called on Ed Morrison to drop his guns and throw up his hands. Looking into the barrels of a scattergun from less than fifty feet had a wilting affect. Ed Morrison obeyed. Wyatt then lined up all the Texicans, waited until reinforcements came, after which he herded them through town to Judge Jewett's bailiwick. One of the bystanders who jeered the humiliated cowboys the loudest was Ben Thompson.

The Texans were read the riot act, an ordnance was proposed against carrying firearms within city limits, and eventually, as the other after affects of this mass-arrest of toughs died away, one thing emerged painfully clear: Wyatt Earp was absolutely without fear. Wichita cooled a little.

Then came six foot three, husky and truculent George Peshaur again. He cursed Wyatt drunk, then met him one day stone-sober and cursed him again. There's a difference. Wyatt took George into the back room of Cogswell's Cigar Store, handed his guns to a friend and proceeded to beat the tar out of George. Wyatt's stature assumed another boost. Along with being fearless and a top-notch hand with a gun, now Wyatt showed up as a fist-fighter de luxe.

But Peshaur was persistent. He dared not cross Wyatt with guns or fists but there was another way. There was a downy-faced Texan among the older men who thought he was great with a gun. George Peshaur and several others told the kid he was a real go-getter, and told him how to beat Wyatt Earp. The meeting took place outside a saloon where Wyatt's patrol took him right into the face of the kid's gun, drawn and cocked Peshaur and the others stood back watching. The kid cursed Wyatt in approved Texas style, then dared him to draw against the drop the kid had on him. Wyatt drew, the kid's gun went flying and blood spurted. Wyatt then had the watchers searched. All of them were wisely unarmed. The kid was taken to a doctor with a shattered gun arm. Wyatt then told George Peshaur he'd used up all his time in Wichita, to get out and stay out. George got.

Wyatt then sent for the curly-wolf among the Texans and told him to pass the word along that no more armed cowboys would be allowed in Wichita. The word was passed, guns were checked, and

two-thirds of the snort was taken out of the Texas men. Like Ben Thompson, George Peshaur and others, the trail wise Texans learned and remembered. Wyatt Earp was no one to fool with, fists or guns.

There were other instances of Wyatt's marked type of bravery and marksmanship but Wichita, her Texans and rowdy element finally subdued, awakened one day to discover that in her preoccupation another Kansas town called Dodge City, had usurped her beef trade. With the herds, went the Tevans and in time Wichita became too peaceful, too quiet, and Wyatt Earp also pulled out.

He arrived in Dodge City the 17th day of May, 1876. By noon of the same day he had a job: Chief Deputy Marshal, with almost as much power as the mayor had. He was to get two hundred and fifty dollars a month and two dollars and fifty cents for every arrest he made. Going right to work, Wyatt hired Jim Masterson, Bat's brother, as one of his deputies. A man named Jack Mason was another. Then Bat himself came drifting in, crippled from a near-fatal fracas in Texas, but with his gun arm unimpaired. He too was hired. Bat hobbled around Dodge banging would-be toughs over the head with his cane until he was whole again.

Wyatt told his men the arrest money would be pooled and divvied, that dead-arrests didn't count, and that they got seventy-five dollars a month. Then, as in Wichita, he cached loaded scatterguns conveniently throughout the town, took a big breath, looked around, and there was *trouble.* Texas trouble. The cowboys had decided to get rid of Wyatt, chouse him away from Dodge City. Accordingly, they sent several of their best rough-and-tumble men against him.

ONE time Wyatt was challenged to bare-knuckles by a huge Texan whom he whipped. As the first man went down another battler stepped up. For nearly an hour they fought. Wyatt, worn down, bruised and out of wind, couldn't knock the Texan out but could and did knock him down so many times the cowboy was finally left on all fours, unable to come up to scratch. No others stepped out.

The Texas men were baffled by Wyatt's indestructability. Wyatt, on the other hand, never let them get their feet under them again. He launched raids, faced down their badmen, pistol whipped recalcitrants and generally made Dodge City law a holy terror. As in Wichita, trouble atrophied, finally died out altogether and Wyatt, with his brother Morgan, got bored. Bat Masterson pulled out. Things were dead, and on the 9th of September, 1876, Wyatt left Dodge City, too.

He went to Deadwood, in the Dakotas, got disillusioned there as far as finding gold was concerned and when he received a telegram from the mayor of Dodge City he was in Cheyenne, footloose and restless. Dodge was being upended by the cowmen again. The mayor wanted Wyatt to come back, and fast. Wyatt wired that he was coming and started south. He arrived in Dodge in July, 1877, and with his coming all but the hardiest or most foolhardy, left town in a long lope.

Then a startling thing was drawn to Wyatt's attention. Dodge, grown a little and with political parties now, wasn't one hundred percent for the Earp kind of law enforcement. There was a rumor that anyone who could kill Wyatt Earp and get out of town without being apprehended, would not be prosecuted by Dodge City officialdom. This resulted in several attempts at assassination which Wyatt survived and as a last resort the Texans sent for Clay Allison, notorious killer who had, at that time, twenty-one dead men to his credit

Allison arrived in Dodge early one morning while Wyatt was still in bed. The killer proceeded to drink himself into a state of mind for the chore ahead. Word was sent to Wyatt, who arose, breakfasted, then went uptown. He saw Allison who also saw him and asked if he was Wyatt Earp? The marshal replied that he was and what about it? Allison talked, stalled, turning a little as he did so to hide the fingers stealing toward his gun. When

he finally went for it there was a big, foot-long gunbarrel punching deeply into his side; Wyatt's pistol.

Allison was too dumbfounded to complete his draw. He backed away, went into a saloon and drank until he recovered from his surprise, then went back outside again, got his horse, rode slowly to the far end of town, then wheeled with a yell, drew his gun and started down the road toward Wyatt, who was waiting for him, afoot, gun drawn and cocked.

Allison slammed his horse to a sliding stop, stared at Wyatt, turned the animal and rode back the way he had come and on out of Dodge without trying a single shot at Wyatt. The best Texas badman couldn't make the grade when ice-cold guts were needed.

Then there was an abortive chase after a renegade named Radabaugh during which Ed Masterson, Bat's brother, took over Wyatt's town-marshal job for Wyatt, and was killed by two gunmen, Wagner and Walker. When Wyatt got back to town the Texans were flaunting hardware again. He accosted the first two armed cowboys he saw, got some lip and pistol-whipped them both to let Dodge know he was back again. There was prompt retaliation, another attempt at assassination. The attempt was made at night outside a theater. A horseman went dashing by and fired three wild shots, all of which missed. Wyatt fired back, missed, squatted to skyline his adversary, shot again and scored a hit. The cowboy, named Hoyt, was drilled through the body. He died on the 21st of July.

Next, Texans under Ed Morrison, whom Wyatt had humbled once before, and Tobe Driskill, cornered Wyatt in the Long Branch Saloon, had him surrounded and Wyatt said later that was one time he thought the ball was over for him. Doc Holliday, maniacal killer and sixgun artist deluxe, walked over beside Wyatt and challenged Driskill, Morrison, and, for that matter, all Texas, to open the game. The Texans backed water. Wyatt was bad enough to face even at odds of twenty to one, but Doc Holliday too, was paring down odds awfully fast.

There were other scraps but none of much color or magnitude and Wyatt turned in his badge to the mayor of Dodge City for the second time September 9, 1879, then he and brother Jim started for Tombstone, Arizona. In the Nations they were accosted by Doc Holliday who calmly tied his horse to the rear of their wagon and rode all the way to Prescott where he left them, and where Virgil Earp with his family joined Wyatt and Jim, continuing on to Tombstone.

Sheriff Shibell, ranking peace officer for Pima County, in which Tombstone lay, met Wyatt Earp. He already knew of Wyatt by reputation and hastened to make such a financially advantageous proposition to Wyatt that before the young man—now thirty-one—could muster logical refusals, he was wearing a deputy's badge.

Business was good; Wyatt cleared over seven hundred dollars his first month in office in Tombstone. He bought some real estate, and Virgil and Jim lived in houses he owned. He and Morgan put up at an adobe hotel and for the most part attended strictly to business. Additional revenue was gained by Wyatt riding shotgun-guard for stage companies transporting bullion. Whenever he did this Morg was left to run the law enforcement end of things in Tombstone.

TOMBSTONE, in fact all of Arizona, at this time was a mecca for gunmen. Among these were Frank Patterson, Curly Bill Brocius, Ike Clanton, Old Man Clanton, Billy Clanton, Johnny Ringo, Tom and Frank McLowery. Some were Texas men and all were poison-deadly. They resented the intrusion of the Earps, of whom they'd heard plenty, and when Wyatt rode shotgun they centered their criminal activities elsewhere and it rankled.

One time the outlaws ran off some mules from the Army's Camp Rucker. Wyatt, Morgan and Virgil were in the posse that went after the renegades. The thieves sent word back that if the soldiers

would send the Earps back to town they'd send some of the mules back, but if the Army didn't, they'd keep all the mules. The officer in command sent the Earps away against Wyatt's advice and he didn't get the mules but he did get a message for Wyatt from Tom McLowery that if the Earps got in the way of the outlaws they'd kill them on sight.

Shortly after this Wyatt met Tom McLowery on a Tombstone street and called him, but Tom was alone and not in a fight-mood. He growled at Wyatt and walked away.

However, before anything further could happen between the two factions Wyatt resigned as a deputy because of the bitter politicking going on as contenders jockeyed for position in the forthcoming election of a new sheriff. Wyatt backed Bob Paul against his former employer, Sheriff Shibell. When the election was at its hottest, Curley Bill Brocius appeared in town armed, got fighting drunk and when town-marshal White tried to disarm Brocius, he was shot in the stomach at such close range his clothing caught afire. Wyatt, standing by, clubbed Curly Bill unconscious and threw him in jail along with some of his running mates. Marshal White, before he died, explained that Bill hadn't deliberately shot him, that his hair-triggered gun had exploded when White was trying to jerk it out of Bill's hand

Then, Wyatt's man Bob Paul was supposedly beaten at the polls by Sheriff Shibell, but Wyatt, smelling a rat, threatened Curly Bill with prosecution for murder unless he told Wyatt all he knew about the election. Bill spilled. The election had been rigged. Under Wyatt's deadly gaze Curly Bill promised to get the information on ballot-box stuffing for Wyatt. About this time Wyatt's brother, Virgil, was appointed town marshal to fill the unexpired term of the defunct marshal White

When Curly Bill came up with evidence of a crooked election Wyatt took the facts to the County Board of Electors, who reversed their previous decision in favor of Shibell and appointed Bob Paul sheriff of Pima County.

Then an insignificant little fellow named Johnny O'Rourke, but called Johnny-Behind-The-Deuce, killed a mining man named Schneider in an argument over a card game over in Charleston, not far from Tombstone. Johnny was arrested and locked up, but Curly Bill and some of his cronies decided to stir up a little excitement by inciting the mining man's friends to have a lynch-party. Charleston's town marshal, a man named McKelvey, decided to try and get his prisoner to Tombstone before things got out of hand. He put Johnny into his wagon and lit out. The ruse was discovered and avenging miners and lynch-happy Brocius and cohorts took out after the prisoner and the marshal.

In a dramatic rescue, just as McKelvey's mules were playing out and the avengers were imminent, Virg Earp happened past on Wyatt's thoroughbred horse, took in the situation, dashed in, took the prisoner behind his cantle and raced for Tombstone, making it without mishap.

Virgil found Wyatt and Morg at the Wells Fargo office. Johnny O'Rourke quaked out his story and Jim Earp came running to tell his brothers that the cowboys, with Brocius and tough Johnny Ringo in their midst, had rounded up more irate miners and were coming after Johnny-Behind-The-Deuce. Wyatt grabbed up a scatter gun and took Johnny across the way to Jim Vogan's bowling alley, which was housed in a long, narrow adobe building, ideal for a fort. Virgil and Morgan Earp were left to guard the gambler. Wyatt took up a position out front. In due time several hundred swearing, shouting miners and cowboys appeared. At sight of Wyatt they streamed closer, howling for blood

Wyatt swept the scatter gun back and forth. He tried to reason with the men. The front ranks stopped. They were looking down the twin barrels of the shotgun. Some men far back yelled for the ones up front to rush Wyatt. He told them he would shoot to kill. It took a long terrible moment for the racket to subside. Then

the crowd wavered and broke. Wyatt Earp had faced them down. His popularity soared with the law-and-order faction of old Tombstone but it also hit a new low with the gunslinging set.

A stage driver named Bud Philpot, grizzled and well liked, was shot to death in an attempted stage holdup, as was a passenger on the same stage named Pete Roerig. The Earps took up the trail and the bitter, complex feud between Wyatt, his four brothers, and the lawless element, was shaping up for a showdown. Morg Earp captured one of the outlaws and a sheriff named Behan set the renegade free. Then, Tombstone's newspaper, *The Nugget*, an opposition sheet, hinted that Doc Holliday, known to be Wyatt's friend, had engineered the robbery as a pardner of the Earps. Holliday was arrested and subsequently released when it was proven that he was in town at the time of the robbery-killings.

Then Sheriff Behan began to show up as some sort of an ally of the outlaw factions, especially the groups around Old Man Clanton and the McLowerys. When outlaws were brought to Behan by outside officers, Behan found ways to turn them loose. In understandable perplexity Tombstone grew more and more puzzled as time went by. Some thought Behan the scoundrel, others were convinced it was the Earps, especially Wyatt. Rumors, threats, counter-threats and villification filled the air. Plainly, a showdown was coming. It arrived in the early evening of October 25th, 1881, when Ike Clanton, drinking and deadly, announced he and his cronies were going to find and kill Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, before another day passed.

THE morning of the 26th of October came clear and brisk. With it also came news that Ike Clanton was waiting uptown and armed for bear. But Ike wasn't waiting for Wyatt and Doc, he was waiting for Billy Claiborne, Frank McLowery, and Billy Clanton, to arrive in town. When they showed up the stage was just about set. Tom McLowery was already with Ike Clanton. There were other friends of the lawless element around too; all were primed and cocked.

Wyatt, Morgan and Virgil, (Jim was incapacitated) buckled on their hardware and started out after the renegades, badly outnumbered in everything but guts. Ike Clanton, peeping out of an alleyway, was spotted by Virgil who asked the outlaw if he was looking for an Earp—then bowled him over with his pistol barrel across the head. Virg and Morgan dragged Ike to court and Wyatt, coming in, was treated to some choice language from Ike. As Wyatt turned to go out he almost collided with Tom McLowery. There were words; Tom called Wyatt a liar and Wyatt slapped him hard across the face. Both were armed. Tom staggered back but made no move toward his gun. Wyatt hazed him into making the attempt and when Tom did, Wyatt cracked him over the head and left him stretched his length.

Ike was fined twenty-five dollars and turned loose. The outlaws gathered together, white with wrath and humiliation, and wound up at the O. K. Corral from where they sent word that they would kill any Earp on sight. The Earps, Wyatt, Virgil and Morgan promptly started for the O. K. Corral. En route they were met by Doc Holliday who insisted on accompanying them, over Wyatt's protests.

The four of them stalked through the crystal clear daylight, three six-foot Earps and garrulous, thrice deadly Doctor Holliday, D.D.S., gunslinger deluxe. Sheriff Behan appeared and tried to talk them out of it. They kept on walking. At the corral the outlaws were waiting. Virgil came upon them and called out for them to throw up their hands, they were under arrest. Frank McLowery swore and went for his gun. Tom McLowery, Billy Claiborne and Billy Clanton did likewise. Ike Clanton didn't fire a shot throughout the entire fight.

Virgil Earp threw up an arm and yelled something. Billy Clanton and Frank McLowery pulled their guns and both fired at Wyatt. Both bullets ripped Wyatt's

clothing but didn't touch him otherwise. Wyatt's gun slammed death right back. One of Wyatt's bullets took Frank McLowery squarely through the guts above the belt buckle. Frank let out a scream. Billy Clanton fired again. Morgan Earp's coat fluttered.

All hell broke loose, bullets whistled and Morgan Earp went down but not before he shot Billy Clanton in the chest. Claiborne fired straight at Virgil twice and missed him both times. Ike Clanton ran over to Wyatt and grabbed his arm, crying for Wyatt not to kill him. Wyatt, momentarily distracted, was a target for Tom McLowery, who shot and missed. Wyatt shook Ike off. Doc Holliday threw up his shotgun and fired at Tom McLowery, who began to run. Doc hurled his shotgun after McLowery thinking he had missed. Tom ran around the corner and fell, insides shredded by the shotgun blast and with another slug in him from Wyatt's gun.

There were another few minutes of it then silence closed down and Frank McLowery lay dead in the middle of the road, Tom McLowery was around the corner of Third Street, dead, and Billy Clanton died as the victors were standing there. Virgil's leg wound was painful but superficial, Morgan's shoulder wound was bad but not fatal and Doc Holliday had a torn hip-holster and a bullet gouge on his back. Wyatt was completely untouched.

The law-and-order faction of Tombstone found Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne in hiding and threw them in jail. Sheriff Johnny Behan accosted Wyatt, said he was going to arrest him. Wyatt told Behan he had played them false and he wouldn't arrest anyone. Behan walked away. Later, a hastily organized coroner's jury acquitted the Earps and Doc Holliday of the deaths, and there the affair should have ended, but it didn't.

SHERIFF BEHAN, Ike Clanton and another would-be gunman named Wes Fuller, stirred up a ruckus which resulted in a trial of sorts. The character assassinations which marked this hearing have lingered to this day, dulling the luster of Wyatt Earp's character. Behan, Ike Clanton, and others, lied unmercifully trying to get the Earps indicted for murder. The judge handed down an acquittal and the lawless element seethed and Tombstone lived in apprehension lest the fight break out all over again. It did.

Assassins shot Virgil Earp, not fatally, and Wyatt learned their identity from witnesses. The would-be killers were Ike Clanton, Hank Swilling and Frank Stilwell, all armed with shotguns. Johnny Ringo was also linked to the murder team. The outlaws took heart from the downing of an Earp and ruthlessness such as even wild Tombstone hadn't witnessed before, broke out. It got so bad the Governor invested Wyatt Earp with full powers of law enforcement and told him to clean up the mess. Then the outlaws struck again.

Morgan Earp, playing pool, was shot through a window within sight of Wyatt. He fell in a heap. Beyond the window was darkness. They took Morg up and made him comfortable. He asked the doctor if he would die pretty soon. The doctor said, yes, he would. Virgil was summoned. The brothers talked for a little while. Morgan didn't die right away.

Afterward, Wyatt went searching for his brother's murderers. He found Frank Stilwell first. They fought. Stilwell died from a load of buckshot under his heart at almost touching range. One for Morg!

Florentino Cruz, a 'breed, was next. Wyatt gave him a headstart for his gun then shot him three times, in the stomach, in the upper body, and through the head, before Cruz hit the ground. Two for Morg!

The third to go was Curly Bill Brocius. Wyatt ran him to earth after a bitter chase. Curly Bill got the first shot, with a scattergun. When Wyatt shot, Curly Bill was almost torn in two. He screamed just before he died. Three for Morg!

There was another, Frank Stilwell, but before Wyatt could get to him he was killed down in Sonora robbing a Mexican trading post.

Several others supposedly involved in

Morgan Earp's death lived to die one way or another, like Johnny Ringo, who was found dead in a clump of scrub-oaks with a bullet through his brain. It was never satisfactorily proven who killed him, nor for that matter, was it proven conclusively that he'd participated in the cowardly attack which claimed Morgan's life.

Wyatt left Tombstone. He knocked around a little, went up to Idaho, down to Texas, visited friends, relatives, and finally wound up in Los Angeles, California, where he lived out his life and died the 3rd of January, 1929.

I don't believe there was a braver lawman or a better friend west of the Pecos than Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp. In later years, those whose information regarding Wyatt came from pretty shoddy sources said he "sold protection" and was involved many times on the wrong side of the law. This kind of nonsense grew out of Johnny Behan's—and others'—hatred for Wyatt, and their persistent lies. Those detractors did everything in their power to calumniate an eminently honest man whose record, if anyone cares to research it, proves quite satisfactorily that Wyatt Earp was one of the finest men ever to bend a rein in the Old West.

BIG CHIEF CRAZY HORSE

CRAZY HORSE, an Oglala Sioux Chieftain, was generally considered the greatest military tactician of the Sioux Indians.

He was bold, adventurous, courageous, and an inspiring leader. A born soldier, during his short lifetime he also built a reputation for his inspirational teachings, which were always on a high plane of ethics.

His name is the incorrect translation of his Indian name of Tashundewitko, meaning "a man like a wild horse." The noted warrior received his name at the time of his birth, when a wild horse raced through village.

This great Indian leader scorned life on the reservation and constantly raided the Crows and the Mandans. When the Sioux war broke out, because the government broke the treaty in which it was agreed that the Black Hills would be left to the Indians, Crazy Horse was the leader of the Sioux Warriors. In the winter of 1875, General Reynolds and General Crook surprised the encampment of the Indians and captured all their horses. Crazy Horse and his band managed to stampede the herd in a blinding snow storm and recovered their mounts.

Later he was joined by many other chiefs and their warriors, until the united Sioux and Cheyenne forces annihilated the military forces under Custer at Little Big Horn in June, 1876.

Crazy Horse and his two thousand followers were closely followed by a force under General Miles, and it was not until the troops used heavy artillery did the Sioux surrender. The great chief was arrested on September 7, 1877, on suspicion that he was planning a revolt, though there was no evidence to support such suspicion. When he started to fight for his freedom he was shot by a guard, which resulted in his death. Crazy Horse was then only twenty-eight years old.

—Jimmy V. Burnette

A
NOVELET

The Fight at

He bit Whitey solidly in the belly, and Les Roach caught him a heavy blow from behind

Antelope Wells

By PHILIP MORGAN

Ward Owens was not a man easily pushed to violence, but there were some things he just couldn't stomach -like roughing up a pretty girl

WARD OWENS sat his horse in the yard talking for a short time with Al Barlow his only rider and then he headed for town It was fall and the year's hard work was over Now it was time to go to town and do a little celebrating. Riding down the stiff slope that fell away from the yard, Ward Owens hit a plainly marked road and followed it at an easy pace He was in no hurry for once and the unaccustomed leisure was good.

As he drifted through this pine scented country, he thought about the year that had passed by This was his fourth year in these hills and he could see a steady progress They had shipped fifty head this fall The range was good and could carry another hundred head and he should be able to get the money from the bank to buy them In time he would be able to afford to lease more government graze and in time he would have a respectable spread.

A deer jumped out of a thicket along the road and bounded away. Ward reined in to watch. He lifted an imaginary rifle and waited and when the deer stopped, as expected, he grinned, and murmured, "You're a dead pigeon, kid," and rode on.

He was twenty-six years old, a tall, heavily built man honed down by hard riding and hard work to muscle and little padding. A shock of absolutely black hair covered his head and grew Indian long down the back of his neck. His eyes were such a dark brown that they looked almost black and his face was angular and tough. But there were wrinkles of humor around his eyes and mouth and his face, relaxed and pleased now, was not hard. On occasions that called for hardness, that same face could be homely and rock hard.

He passed from his land on to that of his former neighbor, Talbot. Talbot had been a shiftless man with nine dirty kids, who had found the rough life in these hills too much for him. He had pulled out, leaving his rude shack a blot on the beauty of these hills. Coming down the trail, Ward came to the road up to Talbot's shack and pulled rein at once. Fresh tracks, coming and going, were cut into the road. It had the look of frequent use. Wondering, Ward turned up the road. If he had a new neighbor, he should stop in and say hello. As he rode, he had the fervent wish that the new man would be a better rancher than Talbot. Living this close, they depended on each other.

The road made a bend and came almost at once into the yard. Ward pulled up again here, amazement and dismay surging through him. Someone had moved in, all right. Talbot's shack boasted a fresh coat of white paint, curtains at the windows and a general air of tidiness that seemed completely out of place.

That much was fine, but what he saw in the pasture behind the house brought a sick feeling to the pit of his stomach. A bleating, crying mass of sheep roved the slope. Ward sat there quite awhile, the shock of what he was seeing very slowly registering. Sheep.

Finally lifting the reins, he rode forward into the yard and raised his voice in a shout, "Hello." No one came from the house and the place had a deserted feeling about it. Looking down he saw the fresh tracks of a buckboard leading out of the yard and guessed that the new owners must have gone on to town. Wheeling his horse, he returned to the main road and again turned toward Antelope Wells. But now the good feeling of the day was gone. Now all his hopes and plans were changed. For this was just the excuse Max Hein would need. He would use the sheep as his reason for running these people out and then he would be pushing right against Ward's line. And it had long been speculated by the people of this land, that when that day came there would be an open break between these two big men who had been enemies so long.

Ward rode the rest of the way to town in deep thought. The sheep were ugly to him. He had been raised in cattle country and he held all the prejudices of cattlemen against the scissor-toothed animals. But a man had a right to his land and a right to do on it what he pleased as long as he didn't injure his neighbor. If there was trouble over the sheep, then it would have to come from someone else, not him. But he knew it would come and he knew who it would come from. And he had sense enough to know what it meant for him and to regret it. But there was nothing he could do. He had to sit tight and see where the chips fell.

COMING [illegible] to the edge of the hills, Ward could look down a thousand feet to the rooftops of Antelope Wells and follow the ribbon of road that wound down to the river and the bridge at the foot of Prairie Street. On the way down, he had a chance to look the town over. He saw that it was full of people in to celebrate the end of another hard year, just as he intended to celebrate. There were farmers from the lower country to the west and small ranchers like himself from the Antelope Hills. As he

came onto Prairie, he saw the horses of Max Hein's Diamond H lined solidly at the rack in front of Ben Mahoney's Star Saloon.

Riding down the street, Ward was alert for signs of trouble and he found them. The people were restrained and quiet. A few called greetings to him, but quite a few just happened not to see him. They were already sensing the coming of a storm and it might be remembered that they were friendly with him. For the feeling between him and Max Hein was known well enough by all these people. He wondered where the new owners of Talbot's place were and knew wherever it was they were feeling the cold blast of disfavor. The farmers were tolerated here, but this was a cattle town first and last and a sheepman would not be welcome.

Ward rode past the Star and pulled in at the barber shop. He went in and took a chair and leaned back, letting all his muscles go loose. He was a man who lived a hard life and a few short moment's relaxation were a luxury he always enjoyed to the fullest. "Cut her off, Pete. Shear me. I'm gettin' weak carrying all this hair around."

The barber, a curious man, but also a cautious one, worked on Ward without talking for awhile. But finally his curiosity got the better of him. "I suppose you heard the news?"

"What's that?" Ward asked innocently.

"Now, you surely heard. They're livin' right up there next to you."

"Look, Pete, I've been working sixteen hours a day. Who're you talkin' about?"

"Them new people, the Elliots. Him and his sister bought the Talbot place."

"Well, it'll be nice to have neighbors again."

"Not these neighbors," Pete said, obviously enjoying the thought of the shock his news would bring. "They're sheepherders."

Ward didn't jump and he saw disappointment erase the eager expression from the barber's long face. He whistled softly. "That might not be so hot."

"You said it that time for sure. Max Hein is fit to be tied. He says he ain't gonna have no stinkin' sheep ruinin' his graze in the Hills. He says they're movin' out and right now. There's liable to be a real mean go-round."

When Ward didn't answer, Pete went on at great length on the evils of sheep. He discussed the probable ancestry of people who would run sheep. His voice droned steadily on without any prompting from Ward. He was still talking when he finished the haircut. Ward paid him and stepped out of the shop, sick of listening.

The minute he was outside, Ward knew that something was wrong. Silence gripped the town. He held up at once and his alert glance took in the scene in this street in one quick, knowing appraisal. Right across from him, a thin, dark young man of medium build was backed up against the front wheel of a buckboard. A girl sat in the buckboard and Ward was struck by her beauty even though now her face was white and scared.

Two of Max Hein's riders, Les Roach and Whitey Dunn, stood in front of the young man. Ward, closely watching, saw the fear on the face of the sheepman and understood how he felt. He was alone and helpless, trapped in a strange town that would show him no more mercy than it would a stray dog.

Turning his head, Ward found Max Hein posted on the porch of the Star, obviously enjoying the scene in the street. Anger and disgust suddenly swept through Ward. There was a wide streak of savage brutality in Hein. He was smiling now and the rest of his crew standing with him were just as pleased.

For just a moment recklessness struck Ward and he almost stepped down into the street to go to Elliot's aid. But caution came and he did not move. All the sensible arguments asserted themselves and held him still. Getting into this thing now would give Hein just the excuse he was looking for. And Ward didn't want to fight the man if he could help it. Not now, when he had only one rider to Hein's ten.

The sound of a blow swung his head

back. Whitey Dunn had hit the sheepman a hard, glancing blow that drove him sideways and dropped him to his knees. The girl screamed. Les Roach moved in now and grabbed Elliot by the shirt front and hoisted him to his feet. He swung a blow at Elliot's belly and Elliot tried to block it and failed. He bent double, crying out, and Roach slashed him on the jaw, dropping him. The girl was out of the buggy now as Whitey moved in to take his licks. She faced the silent audience of cowmen and farmers on the walk.

"Somebody help him. Don't just stand there. What kind of savages are you?" Nobody moved. Some of the men had grace enough not meet her gaze, but others laughed at her. Furiously, she turned and ran around the buckboard. Whitey and Les had Elliot between them now. One of them hit him and the other caught him and turned him around and smashed him back the other way. Blood was running from his face and his features were battered completely out of shape.

THE girl hit Whitey on the dead run. Her fingernails raked at his neck and drew bloody lines. She kicked him on the shins as he turned and he howled and bent over, grabbing for the sore spot. She passed him and flung herself at Les Roach. Roach backed away a step, letting her brother fall to the ground where he lay groaning, his hands over his smashed face. Roach put his arms up, fending the girl off, but she kept at him and in desperation he slapped at her. The blow struck her full in the face and knocked her flat.

"I guess that does it," Ward told himself and stepped from the walk, recklessness and anger bringing up the old taste of wildness. He crossed the street very fast and he reached Whitey as the Diamond H man was starting to lift Elliot from the dust. He grabbed Whitey's shoulder and jerked him around and hit him solidly in the belly with a short left and heard Whitey's breath go out in a whoosh. He swung the right with everything he had and hit Whitey flush on the point of the jaw and Whitey was flung back against the wagon. Whitey's eyes rolled up and then he fell full length to the street, out cold.

Les Roach came in then and hammered the side of Ward's head with a good blow and Ward fell against him and held on a minute to let his head clear. He was filled now with the savage joy of battle. Locked together the two men bucked around the street and then Ward's head cleared and he shoved Les away and grinned at the man. "Come and get it, Les, or I'll bring it to you."

Les came in a rush, a barroom fighter who knew no science except brute force. Ward sidestepped and sledged one clean blow to his neck and Les went to his knees and stayed there, shaking his head. Feeling no mercy, Ward lifted him and smashed one blow to his jaw. Les fell heavily and the fight was over.

Max Hein came striding across the street, rage written in every line of his square face. He was a big man, standing six feet tall, but looking shorter because of his tremendous chest and shoulders. There was in Hein the brute strength of an ox and he enjoyed using it. There was nothing Max Hein liked more than using his hands on a man and showing how tough he was.

Hein stopped five paces from Ward Owens and hit out with his heavy voice. "That wasn't any of your concern, Owens. Maybe you're gettin' a little big for your britches."

The wildness was still in him and he felt no fear and no caution, which was always the way with him once he started a fight. Ward's words were just as bluntly spoken. "If you don't like it, Max, tell your men to keep their hands off women."

"She stuck her nose in where it didn't belong," Hein said, but Ward saw caution come into the rancher's eyes. He was feeling the mood of the crowd and he sensed that the blow the girl had taken had caused him to lose the crowd's sympathy. He added grudgingly, "Maybe he was out of line. He got excited."

"And he got whipped," Ward said

"That's all there is to it, as far as I'm concerned. Unless you aren't satisfied." He threw the challenge at Hein, knowing he was making a sucker play, knowing it was what Hein wanted, and not caring at all. That was how it went with him. He could play the cautious, sensible game just so long, but when he broke loose, then he went all the way.

He saw Hein weighing the challenge and could almost read the thoughts as they passed through the rancher's methodical mind. Hein wanted the fight, but he didn't want it right now. Ward had taken the initiative away and thrown him off balance and he needed time to think before he moved. Because Hein was no fool. He knew Ward Owens and he knew Ward was tough. He stood there a minute and then he said, "All right, Ward. We'll let it pass for now. But I won't be pushed."

Ward turned away from him and dropped to a knee beside the girl, who had lifted her brother's head and was wiping at his face with the hem of her skirt. He heard Max Hein going away.

"Ma'am, we better get him in the wagon," Ward said. "He'll be all right when he comes out of it."

She looked up at him, agony in her face. "Why did they do it? We weren't hurting anybody."

He shook his head. "Never mind now. Just pick up his feet and we'll put him in the wagon." She did it and together they managed to load Elliot in the back of the buckboard. She placed his head on a rolled blanket, making him comfortable. Ward said, "Wait here until I get my horse and I'll drive you home." He went down the street to his horse and mounted and rode back. Stepping down, he tied the reins to the rear of the buckboard and then climbed to the seat beside her and took the reins.

Horses came down the street now. Hein and his riders were pulling out. They raced by the wagon, two men supporting Whitey Dunn and Les Roach in their saddles. The rest of the crew went on, but Max Hein reined in.

"Be out of the Hills with your stinkin' sheep before tomorrow night," Hein said in a cold voice. Then he reined around and galloped after his crew.

WARD drove from town, driving slowly to ease the bumps for the injured man. When they were clear of town, the girl smiled wanly at him.

"I'm Jean Elliot and that's my brother, Paul. I can't thank you enough for what you did."

"Ward Owens, ma'am. I have the next place up from yours."

She said, "I hope this won't mean a lot of trouble for you. I'd hate to think that we brought those men down on you."

He laughed shortly, not entirely free yet of the wildness that had possessed him in town. "No, don't worry about that. Max Hein hates me and always has. This didn't make it any worse."

"Why?" she asked, puzzled. "He seems to want to hate everyone. Why does he hate you?"

"A long story, I guess. I rode for his father, Gustav. He was a hard old man, but he was good-hearted and we got along. I was his foreman the last three years that Gustav lived and Max rode under me. The old man knew it drove Max wild, riding for wages, but he said he didn't know enough about the cattle business to be trusted yet. I had a couple of run-ins with Max and the old man always stood with me. That was a little too much for Max to take.

"Then, when the old man died, he left me the place I run in the hills and a hundred head of cattle. Max didn't like that either, but mainly he didn't like thinkin' that I knew more about runnin' the ranch than he did. He's been waitin' for a chance to plow me under ever since."

Jean glanced at him, her eyes shadowed. "This is such a savage land. I wish we had never come."

It was the opening he had been waiting for. "You made a mistake. If I were you, I'd pack up and get out before tomorrow night. There's a bad streak in Max. There's no telling what he'll do."

"He didn't bother the Talbots," she said. "Why does he pick on us?"

"The Talbots ran cattle and this is cattle country. There's a lot of small ranchers scattered through the hills and they might not take it if he started in on one of them. But a sheepman is different. It's always open season on sheep. It probably doesn't make sense, but they hate them."

She nodded. "I know. We've run into it before. They say the sheep ruin the range for cattle, but it just isn't so. I've seen so many farms where they raised both."

"It won't matter," he told her seriously. "The ranchers won't help you if Hein jumps on you. You saw that in town today. You better get out while you can."

They drove on in silence then, both of them thinking. Ward was wondering if Hein would start trouble over this today, but wasn't sure. He was aware that Ward had many friends among the ranchers and that they might help out. Ward thought that if his participation ended here, Hein might not push it. And he intended it to end here. He wasn't afraid of the other man, but he knew he stood no chance against all of Diamond H in any fight. He was going to do everything he could to see that the fight never started. He had helped these two today, but his help ended right there. From now on, they were on their own. If they were smart, they would move on. If not, there was nothing he could do.

About half the distance home, Paul Elliot began to groan and move his shoulders restlessly along the boards of the wagon box. They stopped and Jean got in the back and lifted his head and placed it in her lap. Her face was softened and gentle and her expression was that of a mother with a child. She soothed him with quiet words, stroking his forehead. His eyes opened and he looked wildly around for a moment and then he saw his sister and sighed deeply.

"What happened, Jean?"

"They beat you, Paul. But you'll be all right. We'll get you home and clean you up and you can rest."

Paul's eyes moved from the girl and he saw Ward standing by the tail of the wagon. For just a second, alarm clouded his eyes. "Who's that?"

Jean looked up quickly and saw Ward and laughed, "Oh, I almost forgot our savior, Paul. This is Ward Owens. He stepped in and beat up the two men who were beating you and then he helped me get you out of town. We are indebted to him."

Ward grinned at Paul, "She is getting a little strong with the praise. I had some luck. Now if you're feeling better, maybe we ought to get on."

Elliot nodded and then added, somewhat grudgingly, "Thanks for the help."

Ward said, "Sure," and went around and climbed to the seat. He drove on towards their place, sobered by what he had seen in Elliot's face and heard in the tone of his voice. You learned to size up a man quickly and he didn't like what he saw in young Elliot. There was an underlying tone of petulance in his voice and his face was weak. Remembering his poor showing in town, Ward had the feeling that Elliot was in way over his head. Against the bitter ruthlessness of Max Hein, this man would stand no chance.

As he drove, he speculated on the difference in the two. The girl was strong, quiet and self-contained, but capable of great anger. And she was not afraid. In town, she had made a better showing against the two ruffians than her brother had. It was strange how strength and weakness could spring from the same source. Two children, products of the same union, the same upbringing, different entirely in character, in strength. He was worried about what he had read in the man's eyes. The stubbornness of the weak was there. He was a man who might walk boldly into danger through ignorance and then once there, fall apart.

THEY drove into the yard and Ward wheeled the buckboard to the door and stopped. With the girl and him helping, Elliot made it out of the buckboard and into the house. They helped him to

his bunk against the far wall of this big main room and he stretched out, groaning again from the pain of his badly cut and bruised face. Ward knew that he would be all right. Nothing was broken and by tomorrow some of the pain would be gone.

Ward knew he should leave, but he held on, wanting these people to understand what they were up against. He said, "You didn't hear this, Elliot, but Max Hein gave you until tomorrow to get out of here. He isn't the kind to make idle threats."

Elliot spoke hotly and at once. "We aren't leaving. This is our place and no one is going to run us out of here."

It was what Ward had feared. He now asked, "Can you handle a gun?"

The girl gasped at that. "They surely wouldn't shoot us."

"They might," Ward said bluntly. "That's what I'm trying to say, ma'am. This isn't something to be taken lightly."

"I don't want to talk about it any more," Elliot said shrilly. "We're staying. You cattlemen are all alike; you want us out of here too. You're just trying to scare us."

Anger boiled up in Ward at that and he wheeled about and went out of the house at once. The girl hurried after him. She caught up with him and took his arm and turned him to face her.

"He didn't mean that, Mr. Owens. We're very grateful for what you did. Thank you for everything."

He was deeply stirred by her and he was worried about her, which was his only reason for giving them advice. It was something he never did. But now he said with careful emphasis, "I meant what I said. If you're smart, you'll leave. If your brother won't leave, then sleep light and keep a gun handy. If they raid you, don't light a lamp and don't open the door. Don't try and protect the sheep; just try to stay alive."

She said, very soberly, "You really think they'll attack us, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I know this country and I know Max Hein. You'd be a fool if you underestimated him. Now, I'll drive your rig down and unhitch it for you."

He got into the buckboard and drove to the barn and she went back into the house. He unhitched and turned the horses into a stall and came back outside. Untying his horse from the wagon, he swung up and rode across the yard. As he passed the house, she came to the door and waved to him. He waved back, but did not stop. He could not afford to become entangled in their affairs.

The ride home was no pleasure. Ward had a picture of her in his mind that bothered him more than he would admit. He had never met a woman who had stirred him as deeply as this one. She was tall and slim-bodied, but there was strength in her body. And the roundness of new womanhood. Her face was oval-shaped and small featured, but her lips were long and full and her almond-shaped brown eyes were wide spaced. She had brown hair that showed a definite touch of red in the sunlight.

She carried herself proudly and she looked on the world with serenity and quiet strength and she had a capacity for loving. He had seen that in her when she held her brother. But she had no business here. Maybe someone as hard as Max Hein could have made it stick, but her brother wasn't that man. The steel had been left out of him.

Reaching home, Ward put up his horse, just grunting in reply to Al Barlow's surprised query about his early return. He went on to the house and sat a long time, thinking deeply. But he always ended up in the same spot. If he helped the Elliots, he was laying himself wide open to Max Hein. And that was just what Hein had been waiting for. A chance to jump him without arousing sympathy for him. Four years' hard work was tied up in this ranch and a man didn't just kick it away because he happened to admire a girl's spunk.

Maybe they would use their heads and pull out. He had the feeling that if the girl had her way, they would. She knew that her brother couldn't stand up against Hein. At the same time, he felt a rush of the old anger against Hein. The man was

too arrogant. He threw his weight around too much. He was long past due to be cut down to size. But Ward knew he wasn't ready to do the job and he wasn't going to lose everything in a futile fight to save people running sheep.

THAT night Ward slept restlessly. He awoke several times in the night and found himself straining to hear. It wouldn't be beneath Max Hein to hit the Elliots a night early. Each time he awoke, he swore at himself for acting like a fool. But he had dreams and Jean Elliot was in all of them, smiling softly at him, thanking him for helping. At four o'clock, he gave up the struggle and arose into a bitter black world and made a pot of coffee and cooked his breakfast. Al Barlow, who was forty years old and beginning to feel the effects of a tough life, came grumbling in from the lean-to where he slept.

"What the hell?, I thought we was all caught up. What you gettin' up so early for?"

"Couldn't sleep," Ward said briefly.

Barlow, small and weathered to the color of leather, grinned and remarked easily, "You'll have to go to town oftener. It's so good for your disposition."

Ward looked balefully across the table at him, but realized he was acting foolish and grinned ruefully. "Sorry. I had a little waltz with Les Roach and Whitey Dunn in town yesterday. They were workin' over our new neighbor on Talbot's place."

Barlow whistled. "Both of them. And you don't have a mark on you. You must be tougher than I figured."

"They were wrapped up in their work. Didn't see me comin'."

"I got a sneakin' hunch," Barlow remarked, "that you ain't tellin' me the entire tale."

Ward took a long drink of coffee and said, "There was a girl. A brother and sister bought Talbot out."

"Ah," Barlow said, his eyes showing laughter wrinkles. "Now it begins to clear up. Not only is she a girl, she's pretty and young."

"Yeah," Ward said drily, "and they're runnin' sheep."

"Sheep," Barlow said explosively and spilled his coffee all over the table and down the front of him. He jumped up, swearing and swiping at his clothes with his hands. He sat down finally. "She must really be a knock-out."

"She jumped into the fight and Les batted her one. That's when I drew cards."

"Max Hein won't care much for you sittin' in. What did he have to say?"

"Nothing much to me. He told the Elliots to be off their place by tonight, though."

Barlow thought about that awhile, his face frowning thoughtfully. "So you beat up on Les and Whitey and you helped a couple of sheepherders. Now Whitey ain't the sort to forget a grudge and Hein has been lookin' to get a chance at you. You really spilled the whole bucket, kid."

"Maybe not. As long as we keep out of it from here on. The crowd figured Les was out of line hittin' the girl and Max can't make too much of it. But that's got to be the end of it."

"Sure," Barlow said. "Are the girl and her brother stayin'?"

"It looks like it."

"And you're plannin' to sit by and let 'em be tromped on? It looks to me like maybe I better check my cartridges."

Ward slammed his fist down on the table. "I don't plan on givin' Diamond H an excuse to throw down on us. We wouldn't stand a chance against that bunch of gunhands Max's hired since the old man died. If Elliot is stupid enough to stay, he'll have to take care of himself. I don't want to hear any more about it." He got up from the table and went angrily outside, slamming the door hard behind him. At the table Al Barlow smiled his thin-lipped smile.

"You won't do a thing," Barlow murmured. "Not much, you won't. Well, I never did like the way Max Hein wore his hat." Whistling tunelessly between his teeth, the tough little rider began to gather up the dishes.

Ward worked around the ranch outbuildings all day. He replaced several of the worn ties on the corral poles and repaired a saddle cinch broken in roundup. He came in at noon and ate a quick meal and went back to work at once. Al Barlow worked around close too, but kept out of his way. The day passed slowly and by evening Ward was jumpier than he had been when he got up. They ate supper shortly before dark and did the dishes and went out to the porch. The Elliots' place was two miles away, slightly downslope and any loud sound would carry the distance.

Ward sat in a chair on the porch and smoked one cigarette after another. Al prowled the yard, restless and made jumpy by his knowledge of Max Hein's character. Barlow had been through three range wars and caution was ingrained in him.

Later on, Barlow drifted up out of the lower yard and sat on the porch step. "There's nothing moving."

"He won't hit us," Ward said. "At least not at first. After he hits them, it may make him a little reckless. He might try it then."

"You want me to ride down there and sit up in the timber with my rifle. I could discourage him some."

WARD expelled a huge breath. "Yeah, but I'll come along. I don't like the idea of that girl bein' there." He went inside and came back shortly with his gunbelt strapped on and his rifle in its scabbard under his arm. They went down to the corral, both men hurrying now that they had made up their minds. They roped out mounts and saddled and Ward saw that Barlow already had his rifle on his saddle

Barlow swung up and grinned at Ward. "Like old times, kid. Never thought I'd be protectin' a bunch of blattin' sheep, though."

"It's my fight, Al. Don't ride along unless you want to."

"That wasn't called for," Barlow replied sharply.

"Thanks, Al. You'll do anytime, anyplace." They rode at once from the yard. This time they did not take the road, but stayed in the timber along the sharp crest of the ridge that fell off to the south towards Elliots'. They cruised ahead, not hurrying and not making any noise. There were ways to do things and both these men had known trouble before. As he rode, Ward felt a tremendous sense of relief. It had been bothering him all day, the thought that he was leaving Jean Elliot down there without help. He was asking for more trouble than he could probably handle, but he was without any regret at all.

They were still a mile from Elliots' when the gunfire broke out. There was one short burst of firing and then it quit. Both men jabbed spurs to their mounts and went forward at the gallop, all caution forgotten. Ward silently cursed himself for being late. Then the firing began again, a lot of firing and it did not let up.

Ward and Barlow broke over the last short ridge above the Elliots' and the whole brutal scene was spread before them. Sheep were bawling and crying in terror in the pasture below them and Diamond H riders moved back and forth among them, firing into the mass. But that wasn't what caught Ward's attention. In the yard, a short distance out from the house, a figure sprawled face down in the dust and another figure crouched beside it. Moonlight bathed this whole scene and gave it a ghostly, unreal quality, but there was no doubting its reality. Ward and Barlow came from their saddles almost together.

Ward drew down on one of those riders in the pasture and fired and heard that man's cry of pain. Beside him, Al's rifle cracked and one of the Diamond H crew's horses fell. The rider jumped up and ran for it and was picked up behind one of the other riders. Ward and Al kept up a steady fire and suddenly all those riders were bolting away, leaving two of their number lying in the pasture. They stopped firing and listened to the retreating echoes of all those riders. When they

were sure they weren't coming back, both men mounted again and rode down to the yard.

Jean Elliot sat in the yard's deep dust, holding her brother's head in her lap. She was crying silently and rocking back and forth in her anguish. Ward dismounted and came to her and pulled her to her feet and turned her against him. She held him and cried out the fear and pain. It was a long time before she stopped and looked up at him.

"He's dead. He heard them come into the yard and went out to see what they wanted. I begged him not to, but he wouldn't listen. They didn't give him a chance."

She was in her nightdress and Ward led her to the house and said, "You get dressed, Jean. I'll see if there's anything I can do." She moved numbly away from him and he went back and knelt down beside Paul Elliot. Elliot's eyes stared at him blankly. He had been shot twice just over the heart and had never known what hit him.

Al Barlow rode up now and got down, saying with satisfaction, "Two down out there. Both dead. They got a good half the sheep, but we evened it up a little." Looking down at the dead Elliot, he shook his head. "Pretty cold-blooded thing. He didn't even have a gun."

"We'll have to dig a grave and bury him. Max will stop and think and know there were only two of us. He'll be coming back then."

They dug the grave in a clearing well below the house and came back to find Jean once again with her brother. She looked up at Ward, her face shadowed and haggard.

He said gently, "We'll have to bury him, Jean. They'll be coming back and it won't do to have you here. They could make a mistake and you could get hurt."

She nodded numbly.

They wrapped Paul Elliot's body in a blanket and carried him down the hill and laid him in the grave. They stood there, the two men awkward and uneasy. The girl cried for awhile, but stopped then and said some prayers for the dead man. Ward led her away afterwards, pushed now by an increasing urgency. Time was running out.

They went directly to the barn and he saddled her horse and turned the two other horses in the barn out to pasture. They came back to the yard, leading the three horses and Al Barlow joined them. Without further talk, they mounted and rode through the lower pasture, past the frightened sheep, and up the first sharp ridge. Well into the timber, Ward drew rein.

"We'll circle around through the hills and come into town from the southwest," he said. "Jean, you can stay at the hotel for a while, until you decide what you want to do."

"What about you?" she asked him at once

Ward grinned tightly. "It looks like we'll stick to the Hills and make a fight of it. Hein will be after us soon enough."

"It's our fault," she cried. "Now you're in trouble."

"It was coming anyway," he assured her. "I guess I knew it was, but I hated to see it start. Max would have found some other excuse to get at me."

Al Barlow laughed shortly. "The man's an Indian, ma'am. He owns more than he knows how to manage now, but he won't quit until he gets all the Antelope Hills. You and your sheep gave him the excuse to start a little sooner, that's all."

"It's all right," Ward told her quietly. "He murdered your brother and he can't get away with it. It has to be stopped, or none of us will be safe."

"But you'll be killed," she said. "He has so many riders."

"Two less now," Barlow replied acidly. "He's laid off quite a few men for the winter. He only had eight before tonight. That cuts it down." He paused a moment, considering. "If we follow this ridge for five miles, we can drop down into the valley and cut across to Wildcat Ridge and then follow it until we're in sight of town. We'll leave you there and you can go in alone."

THEY set out at once, not hurrying and as dawn broke, they were sitting in the edge of the last stand of timber before it broke into the open valley flanking Wildcat Hill. They had made poor time over the broken country and much down timber and now Ward felt an instant dislike of making the run across the open floor of this valley. It was a good half mile across to the timber on the far side and that was too far. Chances were good that Hein and his crew hadn't cut down this way yet, but there was no way to be sure. And if they were caught out there, it could be rough. They sat very still and both men went over the country with careful, searching looks. A crow began cawing in the timber behind them and on the far edge of the valley a buck deer and two does were slowly moving towards the trees, grazing as they went. Everything looked all right.

"What do you think?" Ward asked finally.

"Looks okay," Barlow replied quietly. "But they can see us quite a ways if they're on either ridge. When we go, we better go fast."

Ward looked at the girl, seeing the lines of fatigue in her face. But she smiled bravely when she saw him looking at her. "I'll be all right," she assured him. "Why don't you leave me here and go back? I can make it into town."

Ward shook his head. "I don't trust Hein. He's smelled blood and I don't know what it'll do to him. I wouldn't want him catchin' you right now. We'll cross over. When we go out of here, go on the jump. You go first and we'll be right behind you. Head for those trees on the other side and don't stop until you're in them." He pulled his hat down solidly on his head and glanced at Al Barlow. The little rider gave him a tight, wolfish smile and a nod. Ward raised his hand and slapped it down on the rump of the girl's horse and they came out of the trees at a hard run.

They had not gone a hundred yards when someone raised a shout from the edge of the timber a quarter of a mile up from where they had been sitting. A man fired at them, the echoes of the shot running down the valley. Men spilled from the trees behind them and came after them and now ahead of them, from the trees at the foot of Wildcat, three more men broke cover and ran head on at them.

The girl turned her pony and they followed her, riding up the middle of the valley in the open. They were in trouble now for sure. They could not reach Wildcat and their only hope was to break back into the timber in the broken country they had just left. But the three riders on that side were crowding them too close.

Ward reached down and lifted his rifle out of the scabbard, knowing they had to gain a little time. He rode on for a ways, shouting his instructions to the girl. "Cut for the timber on the right, Jean."

She veered off and by thus cutting away at an angle, brought the three Diamond H men closer. Those men now began a steady firing. Ward yanked back on the reins of his horse and slid to a stop. Raising his rifle, he took deliberate aim at the nearest rider and dropped him with one clean shot. The other two hauled in, weaving and running together in their hurry to get out of the way. Al Barlow was beside Ward, but he was firing at the three men from the Wildcat side, who were closing fast now that they saw their quarry was not going to try and cross the valley.

Ward knew they had gained enough time. Jean was just going into the timber. He yelled, "Let's get out of this," and raked his horse with the spurs. Barlow was beside him, his face savage, his body half twisted in the saddle as he fired back. But suddenly Al's body jerked under the impact of a slug and Ward heard the sickening sound of it. Al went out of the saddle in a long fall and bounced along the earth.

Ward yanked back on the reins and rode back to him, but Al lay on his back, one arm thrown carelessly across his chest. One look told Ward that Al was dead. Hein and his men were closing fast

now and he could not wait. He plunged away, feeling nothing at all yet. The shock of it would come later.

Jean was waiting for him in the timber and she was crying. She had seen Barlow fall. Ward reined in long enough to throw two fast shots back at his pursuers, which stopped them for a moment. Then he rode on with the girl. They rode fast through the pines, moving deeper into the Hills. After a mile they found a game trail and followed it for two miles to a stream and entered it. They rode in the brawling creek for several hundred yards and came out on rock. They again moved into the pines, going always higher. Sunlight came through the trees in patches here and dust particles gleamed in the sun shafts at their passing

Five miles from where they had left the valley, Ward stopped. Jean was weaving in the saddle and he knew she could not go on much further. Casting around in his mind, he remembered an old prospector's shack a short ride away and decided to chance it. If they were tracked down, they would at least have cover to fight from. And the girl had to have rest.

"Can you hold on another mile?" he asked.

She nodded. "I think so, Ward."

"If you feel dizzy, yell and I'll help you," he told her.

They set off at once. She was reeling now and he moved his horse up beside her and put his arm around her and supported her. She leaned on him and he felt sorry for her. The shock of her brother's death and then the long, hard ride with fear always with her and a night without sleep, all of these things were catching up with her. She was bearing up bravely and he admired her courage. She hadn't whimpered once

After a slow ride, they reached the cabin. He got down, feeling the stiffness in all his muscles. He groaned to himself when his feet hit the ground. Going around, he reached up to her and she came into his arms and held to him for support. Bending, he picked her up and carried her into the cabin and laid her down on the packed earth of the floor. He was about to rise to go get the horses when she pulled his head down and kissed him.

She was smiling at him, the soft, secret smile of a woman and she said, "Thank you, Ward, for everything," and then she laid back and was asleep almost at once, worn out completely.

Ward brought the horses into the cabin and tied them against the far wall. He wanted to leave them out to graze, but couldn't risk it. Not without staying with them and he was too tired to do it. They would have to wait until he had slept. He thought that they would be safe for a few hours at least and he needed that time to rest

He stood over the girl, seeing the way her even breathing stirred her breasts, seeing the woman in her and seeing in her relaxed face the child of not so long ago. Then he laid down beside her, his body aching with weariness, his mind numbed by it. Mentally cautioning himself to awake in three hours, he went deeply to sleep.

MAX HEIN was the man who shot Paul Elliot. He led his men to the ranch and they rode on to the pasture and the hated sheep. Hein sat his horse in the yard, covering. He didn't think there was any fight in Elliot, but it paid to be careful. In a way, he almost hoped Elliot would fight

It would give him a reason for killing the man It would give him this ranch and would spread him further into these Hills. It would, he thought with satisfaction, bring him right up against Ward Owens's line. A little provocation then and he would be able to jump Ward. And he had been thinking about that day for a long, long time.

His men began firing into the sheep in the pasture and almost at once the door to the house slammed open and Elliot dashed out, shouting at them to stop. He saw Hein sitting his horse there and ran for him

"Stop them. They have no right to do

that," he yelled.

Max Hein lifted his gun from its holster and ordered Elliot to stop. "Hold it right there, sheepherder."

Elliot came charging on and Hein lifted his gun, sighted on the man and fired. Elliot stumbled and Hein felt a sharp pleasure. He fired again and this time Elliot went down hard and didn't move. The girl screamed and ran from the house. Hein wheeled his horse and raced for the pasture to join his crew, feeling a savage satisfaction now that the act was done. For too long now he had played a waiting game, hoping for a break that would give him an excuse to take over the fine summer pasture in these hills. And the sheepherder had given him just the excuse he needed. It was about time. He was sick of waiting.

Hein had not reached his men when the two rifles began firing on them from the short ridge to Hein's right. Panic grabbed him for a moment, knowing that all of them made prime targets caught out here in the open in the bright moonlight. He went away from there fast, cutting across the pasture and reaching timber on the far side. His crew was behind him, but shortly caught up and halted. Hein learned that two of his men had gone down.

Whitey Dunn said bitterly, "It was Owens and Al Barlow, Max. I'd bet a month's wages on it."

"That's all right," Hein said savagely. "They drove us off, but we'll go back and now no one is going to blame us for shootin' up Owens. Not when he's takin' sides with a lousy sheepherder."

Les Roach, a man as tough as either of these other two, broke in thoughtfully. "Understand one thing, Max. When you go to stompin' on them two, somebody's going to get hurt."

"If you're scared, pull out," Hein told him acidly. "We can get by without you."

Roach said at once, "Don't get hard with me, Max. I won't push and you know it. And if I was scared, I wouldn't ever have signed on with you in the first place."

"All right," Hein said, "that's better. Now we'll just lay up here until dawn and go back there again. Maybe we'll catch Owens there."

The Diamond H crew dismounted and unsaddled. They slept out the night here and rose in the first gray light of half-dawn to ride out. They came through the timber to the edge of the Elliot's pasture and sat in the timber while dawn flushed the eastern sky. The sheep moved restlessly about the pasture and the two Diamond H men lay where they had fallen. Nothing moved around the house.

"They've pulled out," Hein said and put his horse out into the open. His men cautiously followed him. They searched the house and barn and found nothing. Les Roach made a sweep and found where three set of tracks led off towards the timbered ridge at the lower edge of the pasture. He reported this and Hein sent him off again to find out which way they had gone. If they headed back into the broken country, he would have to return to the ranch for supplies before giving chase. But he had to know. He walked impatiently around the ranch yard until Roach returned a half hour later with dawn now full on the land.

Hein laughed at Roach's report and swung up. "They're heading for town. We can cut them off when they come down off the ridge." He split his force, taking three men with him and sending Whitey Dunn, Les Roach and a rider known as Latigo to run the base of the ridge the fugitives were following. It was open country down this valley, with the high ridge on the right and the small hills on the left that gradually grew rougher until they came up against te solid height and bulk of Wildcat. The whole crew set off at the gallop down the valley.

Hein pulled into the timber a mile from where he guessed Owens would try to cross the valley and ran on and he saw Dunn and the two men with him take cover on the other side. They were still north of Owens when Hein saw him and the girl and Barlow ride from the trees. A hard exultation surged through him as

he saw that they were just in time to cut them off. He swung out of the timber and raced for the three as one of his men on the far side fired the first shot.

It was a hard run across the valley floor. He saw the girl swing her horse and cut back for cover on the far side. He brought up his rifle, seeing Owens and Barlow stop and open up on Dunn. He saw Latigo throw his arms high and plunge from the saddle and as the two turned to ride away, he caught Al Barlow's shape in the sights and fired, and laughed when Barlow fell and bounced. But Owens was going on and he reached cover with the girl and stopped there. Hein reined in, and cut further south. They could not rush him. Owens fired twice at them and the crew lost interest and followed Hein.

AN EIGHTH of a mile below where Owens had entered the timber, Hein led his men in. They cut back until they saw the tracks and followed them. They did all right until they came to a stream and the trail ended here. Hein sat there, feeling a frustrated anger, knowing that now it was going to take time to find Owens and the girl. With Dunn and Roach, he would continue the search. But there was work at the ranch that would not wait. So he told the other three to pick up Latigo and the two who had fallen last night and return to the ranch. With Dunn and Roach, he then began making a careful search for Owens's trail out of the stream.

They worked at it most of the day and they found nothing at all. They made wide casts through the timber and found nothing and by late afternoon, he knew with bitter certainty that Owens had eluded them. It made him savage tempered and he could not think clearly. It seemed that Owens always outsmarted him.

As it began growing darker in the pines, Whitey Dunn finally said, "He gave us the slip. There's no sense in beatin' a dead horse."

"He's not gonna get away," Hein said. "I promise you."

"Let him go, Max. He'll have to come back sometime and when he does, we can handle him. Right now you've got his land and he won't give it up without a fight."

Hein thought about it, recalling what he knew about Ward Owens, and he knew that Whitey was right. Ward would come back. "I guess that's right. We'll just wait him out. Let's go to town and get somethin' to eat." He led them out of the Hills, towards the lights of Antelope Wells . . .

Ward Owens awoke the allotted three hours after lying down. He came awake all at once, carefully listening, and heard nothing. Getting up, he saw that Jean was still sleeping soundly and was pleased. She had been worn right down to where she had been going on nerve alone. Untying the horses, he led them from the cabin and let them graze, while he sprawled on the ground, leaning back against a tree, his body completely relaxed. Lying there, his senses were alert to the sounds of these woods, for he knew Max Hein. The man was a savage who would be wild that they had escaped him. It would not do to relax caution.

The girl came from the cabin an hour later, her face still soft with sleep. She came to sit beside him and he saw the sadness in her eyes even as she smiled at him. "Didn't you rest at all?"

"Sure," he said. "I woke up a little while ago."

She looked directly at him now, frowning slightly with worry. "Now what happens, Ward? Do we just keep running?"

He had been thinking strongly about this and the whole thing had been building up in him. Thinking of what Max Hein had done, the cold-blooded murder of Paul Elliot, the killing of his friend Barlow, the tragedy he had brought upon this fine girl, the rage had grown in him and he knew what he had to do. Max Hein had to die or he had to, one or the other. And now that the decision had been made, he knew that he should have faced up to it long ago. For he had always known that some day Hein would be com-

ing after him. His liking for Hein's father had kept him from facing it squarely long ago.

"We have two choices," he told her. "We can go straight over these hills to the desert and across it and never hear of Hein or the Antelope Hills again. Or we can stay and fight him. This is my home. I know every rock and tree and blade of grass. I can sit on my porch and look out on some of the best country I know of. I've worked four hard years on that place and if I run, I lose it all. So I guess I'm going to stay."

He saw her eyes darken with concern. She said quietly, "Are you sure that's all it is, Ward? Are you sure it isn't because of me?"

"Maybe partly," he admitted. "What he did to you was pretty rotten. And maybe it's because of Al Barlow partly. He was a good friend, a better man than Hein ever was."

She dropped her gaze from his now and she colored slightly, but she spoke in a direct, unbending way. "I don't want you to fight. If anything happens to you, I don't know what I'll do. I suppose that sounds silly. We've known each other such a short time, but I feel like that, just the same. But I couldn't stand to see you run. My brother ran from things and he never stopped running. I wouldn't want that to happen to you."

Ward reached out and took her shoulders, turned her and drew her into his arms. When he bent his head, her lips were waiting for his kiss. It was a gentle kiss, full of promise for him and he knew that this woman held everything he had ever wanted.

When she drew back, he said, "I know how it is, Jean. When this is over, I'll be coming for you."

"I'm going with you," she said simply. "I couldn't stand waiting and not knowing."

Looking at her, he saw that she would not change her mind and he said, "All right. We might as well get started."

He got up and saddled the horses and they rode away from the cabin. Ward led them directly out of the Hills and at dusk they came onto Antelope's street. As they went down the street, he saw people turning to stare after them and knew that news of the fight had reached town. He left Jean at the hotel and put up the horses at Benson's livery stable and returned to the hotel. Standing on the hotel's porch, he scanned Prairie Street with a careful attention and saw nothing to indicate any danger. He smiled grimly. Hein was apparently still prowling the Hills.

GOING inside, he ate supper with Jean, the food filling a huge empty place in him. Afterwards, he left her in the lobby and returned to the street, knowing that the odds were good that at least some of the Diamand H crew would come into town tonight. They would have to return either here or to the ranch for food and this was closer. He prowled the street, making sure that none of Hein's men were in town. And then he crossed to the livery barn and stood just inside the big double doors and smoked out several cigarettes. This was as good a point of vantage as there was in town. The night man came from the small office and saw him and returned at once, recognizing that it might be unhealthy to be too close.

The rage he had felt earlier had settled now into cold anger. He knew that his chances here were not good, but he knew also that he had to stay. So it was, when Max Hein and Whitey Dunn and Les Roach rode into Antelope Wells, Ward was there and saw them. He moved back out of the circle of light made by the lantern that always hung at night above this doorway. He watched them come down the street and saw the weary way all of them rode. They came on and pulled in at the rack in front of the Star across the street. Ward let them get down and come around behind the horses and they were loosely grouped there, talking, when he threw his quiet words across the eighty feet of dusty street.

"You can stop lookin' for me, Max.

You found me." He moved into the circle of light, seeing those three men whirl, seeing them become still. He had caught them badly off guard and for a moment, they were uncertain.

Les Roach reacted first. He took a step aside and drew as he moved. Ward matched the draw and brought his gun clear up, taking an extra second to sight. Roach's gun crashed and the slug slammed into some wall behind Ward. Ward had dropped the hammer of his gun and saw Roach wheel and fall and then Ward jumped back out of the light. He moved out of the doorway, hearing the slugs from Hein's and Dunn's guns searching for him. He turned and ran for the back of the barn and let himself out the back door into the strong ammonia smell of the corral. He reached the corral poles and slid through and made a long run along the back of the buildings and turned down an alleyway between two buildings and reached the street. He held up here, searching the shadows for the two men.

They had crossed the street. And they had separated to move in on the barn from two sides. He was behind the man on this side, whose outline, he could make out some fifty feet away.

Stepping out of the alleyway onto the board walk, he called, "Right here," and saw that figure whirl around and come into the faint light from a store window.

It was Whitey Dunn. Dunn's gun exploded almost at once, but the shot was four feet wide. Taking his time, Ward fired and heard the slug tear through Dunn. Down the street, Max Hein's big voice was yelling. Ward could not make out the words. Whitey took an uncertain step and his gun went off again, but this shot was fired straight down. Dunn tripped over the edge of the walk and fell headlong into the street and didn't move.

Ward went forward now, walking cautiously and quietly, listening for sounds of Max Hein. The light was tricky along this street. There were pools of light and pools of deep shadow, with one blending into the other subtly, until a man could not be sure of what he saw. They stalked each other in silence, tense and dangerous. Ward reached a small entryway into a building and stepped in there and waited. Waited while the seconds ticked on towards eternity. Waited while his mind touched on a picture of Jean Elliot and quickly put it from him. Waited while the cold fingers of death brushed him.

It came finally, a small noise, yet loud in the false stillness of this street. A scraping of a boot along the board walk which placed Max Hein for him. It was all he had waited for. Stepping very quickly out of the entryway, he wheeled and had Hein squarely before him at a distance of twenty paces. Hein stopped, his gun held chest high as Ward's was.

Hein said, "I've been waiting a long time for this, Ward," in a conversational tone. There was no fear in the man now and Ward gave him a grudging admiration for that. But Max Hein was a destructive man and he had to be stopped. Remembering Old Man Hein, Ward had his one clear moment of regret that this had had to happen.

Hein pushed his gun forward then and Ward fired at once, hearing Hein's gun fire and seeing the long, lancing flame it threw at him. Nothing touched him and he cocked his gun again, seeing that Hein still stood. But he did not fire. He had heard the tearing sound of a bullet hitting flesh. Hein stood very straight for what seemed a long time. At last he gave out one long, tired sigh and fell loosely to the walk. His hat bounced from his head. Ward walked cautiously forward, but Max Hein was dead.

Ward turned away at once, as people came slowly out of hiding and advanced. He avoided them, in a terrible hurry now to get back to Jean. She would be waiting for him with her slow smile, with the sadness in her eyes that completely failed to hide the promise those eyes held for him. And as he crossed the dusty street, he thought with wonder how strange it was that good could come directly from violence.

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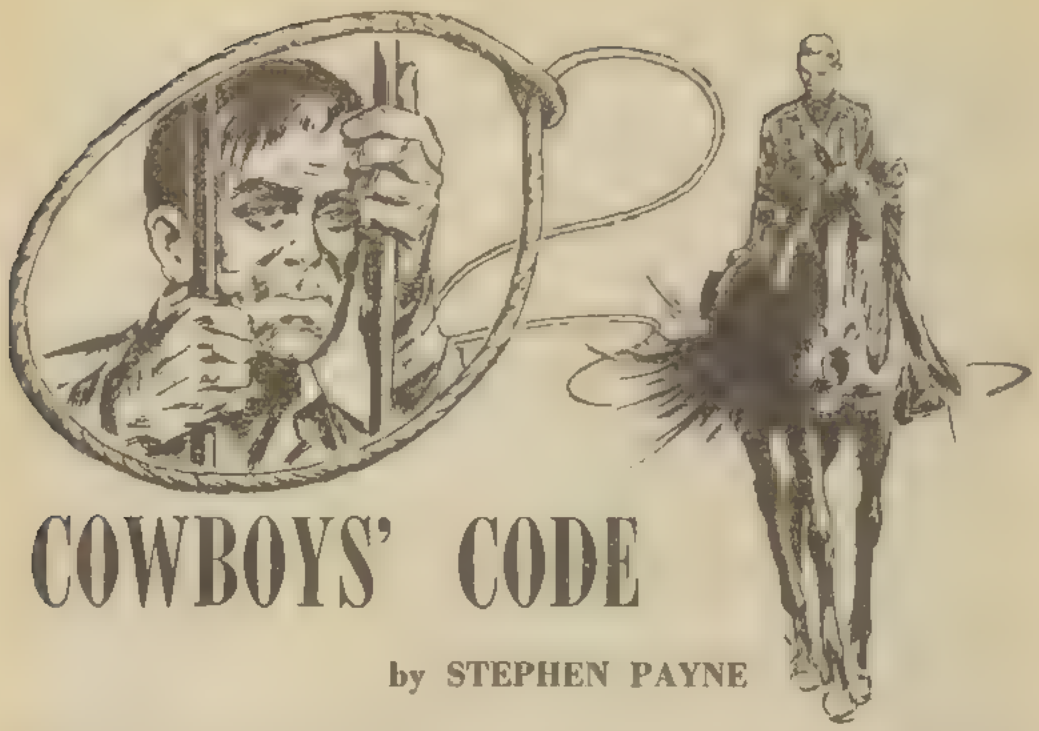

COWBOYS' CODE

by STEPHEN PAYNE

I DIDN'T understand cowboys when my first real clash with those lean, taciturn, dusty men who live on horseback took place. The trail herds were still moving north from Texas, and I was the young town marshal of a wide spot on the prairie named Sunflower.

Sunflower dozed both night and day until some trail herd outfit happened to pitch camp nearby. Then it came alive to the music of thudding hoofs, lusty yells and popping six-shooters. And I, Ken Dikes, was supposed to take guns away from those thirsty and exuberant riders, and maintain order.

The saloonmen—there were four of them—and the liveryman and storekeepers were completely non-cooperative; other citizens of Sunflower always had immediate and pressing engagements elsewhere when I asked for their help.

But the town boasted a reasonably substantial jail and I had a lot of stubborness and grit; more grit than sense.

So, all in all, I had made my law enforcement stick until the evening this Bell Three Bars outfit whooped into Sunflower and began to irrigate their dry tonsils. I learned that two men had stayed with the herd five miles west of town, but there were still eight of these rawhide sons of the alkali for me to control.

When I started to collect firearms I was told where I could go by the boss himself, Chet Miles. He was tall, big-shouldered, rangy, a fellow who looked like he could break a bronc before breakfast or wrestle and pin down the biggest and meanest old steer in his herd.

This first mild clash was in Hub Mason's Saloon. Rather than draw my shooting iron, I backed water, and then conferred with Hub and several other substantial citizens. All advised me to lay off.

I was just sitting in the hotel, plenty

Shooting up the town was one thing, molesting a young girl was another . . .

mad and disgusted, when along toward midnight Fulton Carter, the hardware merchant, burst in on me. He was wild-eyed and as white as an alkali patch. One of those Bell Three Bars devils had somehow managed to meet Fulton's fifteen year old daughter, Hattie, and had lured her into the back room of the store. Fulton, who was keeping the store open in the hope of catching late customers, was absent at the time. Upon returning, he had heard suspicious noises and he'd caught them together. The man had knocked Fulton end over end and had fled.

Hattie was hysterical. Doctor Larrison was now with her and her mother and had confirmed Fulton's worst fear and suspicion. Fulton could positively identify the guilty man, and I must arrest him.

This was the first offense of this kind we'd had in Sunflower and I was as burned up as Fulton. Together we went out to hunt the fellow and by lucky chance found him alone in the first saloon we entered. I'd seen him before and was positive he was one of those Bell Three Bars cowpunchers.

"That's the man, Ken," Fulton Carter snapped.

I said, "You're under arrest, puncher. Hand over—"

He yanked out his six-shooter. But I knocked the gun out of his hand and then floored him.

"What's he done?" the barkeep on duty asked.

Fulton told him, savagely, and this bartender legged it to tell the man's pals what was going on, while Fulton and I took the prisoner to jail and locked him up

Within fifteen minutes after Fulton had gone home, leaving me to guard the offender, in came four of the Bell Three Bars cowpunchers. All had been boiling drunk, but apparently the news had partially sobered them.

"You got one of our boys, Jake Horn, in your damn hoosegow?"

"Yes. My prisoner told me his name is Jake Horn, and he is one of your outfit."

I rather expected the punchers to deny it. But the reply was: "Sure 'nuff. We want him."

"You'll play hell getting him," I said. "It would be smart of you boys to leave town before the citizens organize a mob to lynch all of you."

"They'd play hell doin' it." The spokesman threw my crack back at me.

JUST then the boss himself, Chet Miles, and two other cowboys rode up, leading horses for the rest of the crew. Facing me in the starlight in front of the jail were seven men and eight horses.

The four who's come here first all looked at their boss and one asked, "Is what we heard right, Chet?"

"We've checked on it, boys," Chet said. "Billy and Smitty and me have seen the doc and the gal's parents, and it's true. Jake Horn is in this jug?" he asked me.

"You're damned right he is," I snapped back. "Look! You've satisfied yourselves Horn's guilty, so get out of town. Let the law take its course."

"We'll get goin' when we get ready," Chet Miles told me. His drawly southern voice wasn't loud, but there was power in it. "And Horn goes with us. He's one of our bunch, marshal. Savvy?"

"No, I don't savvy," I said, hand on my gun. "You'll not take Horn out of my jail. Don't make matters worse for all the rest of you by threatening me and obstructing justice. What can you want with this loathsome cur?"

"I said," Chet replied, "he's one of us, one of the Bell Three Bars crew, and we kind of look after our own boys, marshal. Unlock your jug and bring Horn out."

"Nothing doing!" I answered. "And don't you rip snorters defy—"

A rope I hadn't even seen made a swishing noise as a loop dropped down over my head and shoulders. As I tried to snake out my gun I had a fast glimpse of the rider at Chet Miles's right. It was he who had quietly made ready his rope and flipped it onto me. Instantly he jerked

the noose taut, pinning my arms to my sides, and as his horse was wheeled away, I hit earth like a busted steer, bounced, and hit again.

Then the horse stopped and three men piled on me. Five minutes later, I was inside the jail with the door locked, and Jake Horn was mounting the horse the men had brought for him.

I heard him shout, "Gosh, boys, thanks! You sure done me a good turn."

Then the riders were gone in a dust cloud, speeding westward out of Sunflower toward their own camp and their herd.

I yelled at the top of my voice, and kept it up until at last men came and let me out.

"I want a posse, quick," I stormed. "A full dozen of you, to go after that damned Bell Three Bars crew and arrest the whole outfit."

"Now take it easy, Ken," Hub Mason advised. "Them fellows are mostly Texans. More'n that, they're cowpunchers to boot. Tangle with one of 'em and you're fightin' a bear an' a wildcat and a mustang wrapped up in one cowpuncher's hide. Hell, they'd make sausage of any town posse and feed the sausage to the coyotes."

"Besides," put in another man, "you're just a town marshal. You ain't got no right or business going outside town limits. Forget it, Ken."

"I ain't forgettin' it, ever," I fumed. "I'll—"

"Hold up a minute," said Mason who, I was to learn, was pretty wise to the ways of cowboys. "Did Chet Miles and them other boys know for sure jus' what Jake Horn done?"

"Sure thing. They verified it with the doc. Now get outa my way, yellow bellies. I'm goin' if I have to go alone."

I brushed past them heading to the livery stable to get my horse. I then heard Mason's "Don't blow your top, Ken. Cowpunchers have got a code they stick by pretty doggoned close."

I took time to pick up a Winchester as well as get my horse. Then I was loping out of town.

West of Sunflower is one of those stream beds that are dry most of the year, with a string of big cottonwoods growing along its course. The road I followed ran past these cottonwoods, and all at once I pulled my horse back on his tail gaping at one big cottonwood. Something hanging at the end of a rope dangled from one of its out-flung limbs.

Presently I got a grip on myself, rode closer and dismounted for a closer look at this dangling object. It was the Bell Three Bars cowboy named Jake Horn, and he was completely dead. Tucked in the top of one of his boots was a piece of paper. I got it, lighted a match and read,

"He's all yours now, marshal."

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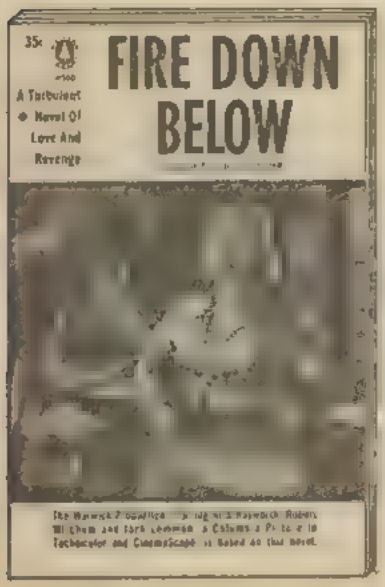

600 P

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Jeff felt the sting of the knife blade against his ribs

BOOT-AND-SPUR MAN

By W. J. REYNOLDS

YOUNG Jeff Colley felt good from the tip of his new boot toes to the top of his fancy creased stetson. He usually did feel good but since crossing the Red at Doan's store three weeks ago he'd felt extra frisky. He hipped about in the saddle, the new leather squeaking with a fine sound, and looked back at the sleek mare on the end of his lead rope.

Jeff was all through with cotton picking—till he tangled with Otis Bainbridge and daughter

Minnie Belle had much to do with that extra frisky feeling Jeff had. Jeff fronted in the saddle again and slapped the front pockets of his stout denim breeches. The laden pockets gave forth a fine jangle. There were three hundred dollars worth of gold eagles in those pockets and Minnie Belle had put them there, and Jeff figured before he ambled into Austin his hind pockets would be just as full.

Jeff chuckled, then whooped, and because the whoop rang with a satisfying sound in the crisp fall air of Texas, Jeff whooped again just for luck. It sure looked like horsemen could look at Minnie Belle's limber muscles and slim dainty legs and hoofs and save their money, but they just couldn't seem to see anything

but Minnie's small size and bet on their own plugs much to Jeff Colley's enrichment. Buying Minnie with his trail wages from that squatter in the Nations had been the smartest move he'd ever made.

Jeff grinned happily as he anticipated his arrival home in Austin and the cutting but modest remarks he would make to his loud mouthed brothers. Jeff thought of the dire predictions and scathing remarks that had been directed at him when he announced he was heading north. If he'd listened to his braggy brothers, he'd be picking cotton right now.

Jeff snorted, and wiggled his toes in the high heel boots and rattled his long shanked spurs just for luck. None of that cotton picking for Jeff Colley, he was from now on, strictly a boot-and-spur man. Jeff Colley wasn't about to break his back picking cotton!

Jeff topped a rise that gave him some advantage over the timber, and ahead he saw a thin trail of smoke. Jeff looked at the sun, lifting toward noon, and again at the smoke. He pulled his riding horse to a slow walk. Ought to be right about dinner time when he pulled up at that place ahead for a drink of water!

Could be that this fellow ahead there had a favorite horse he thought was some shakes at running, nearly all of these one horse ranchers and farmers usually had some kind of plug they thought could run. Jeff looked back at Minnie Belle, winked and slapped his hind pocket suggestively.

As Jeff came in sight of the place, he saw that it was a tight farmstead. Neat house and barn and corrals, all white washed. In the holding pasture behind the barn were several horses and four mules. Jeff grinned. Mules meant work animals so the horses would be for trading or maybe just for pleasure or because he liked horses.

Jeff saw a woman moving through a window, the room where the smoke came from a brick flue, and two men emerged from the barn and came leisurely toward the house. They seemed to be shined up. The lanky one had on a white shirt, and the other had a shirt with candy stripes and a hard hat. Jeff squinted at them then suddenly he grinned.

Sunday! By doggies this was Sunday and one of those jiggers would be company. Company meant only one thing this time of year in the backwoods. Chicken for dinner! Jeff grinned happily.

He turned off the road and into the lane that led to the house, passing a cotton patch on one side. Jeff cut a wary eye at the cotton. It was pocket high and loaded with open bolls, ready to be picked. Jeff knew more of cotton than he would have admitted to his late cowboy companions. He knew this was more than ready for picking, any kind of bad weather now would lose this farmer some money.

Beyond the house Jeff could see the heavy green of more cotton, a right sizeable patch, nearly twenty acres, and even from this distance, Jeff could tell it was ready to pick too. This man would be behind on his crop and from the looks of things he didn't have any hands or more would be gathered. He'd likely be pleased to have some though.

Jeff lost his grin as guilt pricked him. He concentrated on the ears of his horse, well, sir, he was no cotton picker and just for a meal a man wasn't obligated to help a man gather his crop! Farming was a farmer's business and not for a boot-and-spur man to worry over.

JEFF reined up as the two men stopped just short of the yard. "Howdy," Jeff said.

"Howdy, son," the lanky man said. He was a tall man with a bony face and kind brown eyes. "Light down, boy, just in time for dinner. Fried chicken." The brown eyes developed a twinkle.

Jeff said solemnly, "I wouldn't want to put your missus out none."

The lanky man waved a hand. "No trouble, son, put your horses in the lot. Better shake a leg, too, dinners about ready."

"Maybe I will then," Jeff said.

Otis Bainbridge stood looking after Jeff, a smile on his lips. It was wonderful to be young with the world in your hand. Now

there was a nice young man sitting on top of the heap, might be a little bit cheeky, but take the wind out of him and he'd stack up right good.

Otis's eyes watched the smooth, effortless movements of the mare and his eyes lost their twinkle becoming suddenly shrewd. His glance went to Jeff then and the twinkle was back

Now that boy makes a few honest dollars racing that little mare, Otis thought, that's what makes him look so ready to spit in a panther's eyes. He'll be ready to maneuver me into a race!

Otis Bainbridge's expression settled to a ministerial solemnty. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, my boy! And thank you, Lord, for sending me a cotton picker! And if You are still willing I will do my humble best to add still another picker to my patch!

Tobe Hooten, beside Otis, hadn't spoken, but he was scowling after Jeff, his round blue eyes angry, and his hulking shoulders hunched under the candy striped shirt like he was about to launch himself after Jeff.

"Another damn bum," Tobe Hooten growled. "Why didn't you send him packing? He just stopped for a invite to a meal."

"Of course, Tobe," Otis said mildly. "These young fellows get hungry. He's just back from the trail, I'd say. I made a cow drive twice—to Abeline. Kind of liked it, too. He looks like a nice boy."

"A bum," Tobe said. "Offer him a job picking cotton and see how quick he'll have other business! I say send him packing. You got to be careful with women folks in the house!"

Otis didn't look at Tobe, knowing he'd see instant rage in the marble round eyes of his hulking neighbor. "Well, I'll take a chance," Otis said innocently. "I venture to say Allie will enjoy his company. He's no more than a couple of years older than her seventeen. Young folks enjoy each other's company, Tobe, they ain't like old heads like me and you."

"I'm not but twenty-six!" Tobe snarled. "I ain't old."

"Doggone, Tobe, I'm sorry," Otis said. "Guess I wasn't thinking." Otis enjoyed needling Tobe now and then, even though it was usually dangerous. But Tobe had been stalking Allie for two years now and didn't dare bow up to her father.

Otis had let things go, being usually a peaceable man, crediting Allie with better sense than to match up with Tobe Hooten. But lately, Tobe had gone a little too far. He'd beaten several boys brutally, too brutally for mere fights. Lately, Allie hadn't had any callers except Tobe. Otis didn't like this at all

Jeff came back and the three men moved to the wash bench on the back porch, and introduced themselves. Tobe just scowled and didn't offer to take the hand Jeff offered. Otis wasn't displeased when he saw Jeff Colley's blue eyes frost over. But the boy said nothing. They went inside as a woman's voice called dinner

Otis saw Jeff's eyes pop at sight of Allie, then dart at Hooten with sudden understanding. He looked at Otis and Otis winked. Jeff suddenly grinned widely.

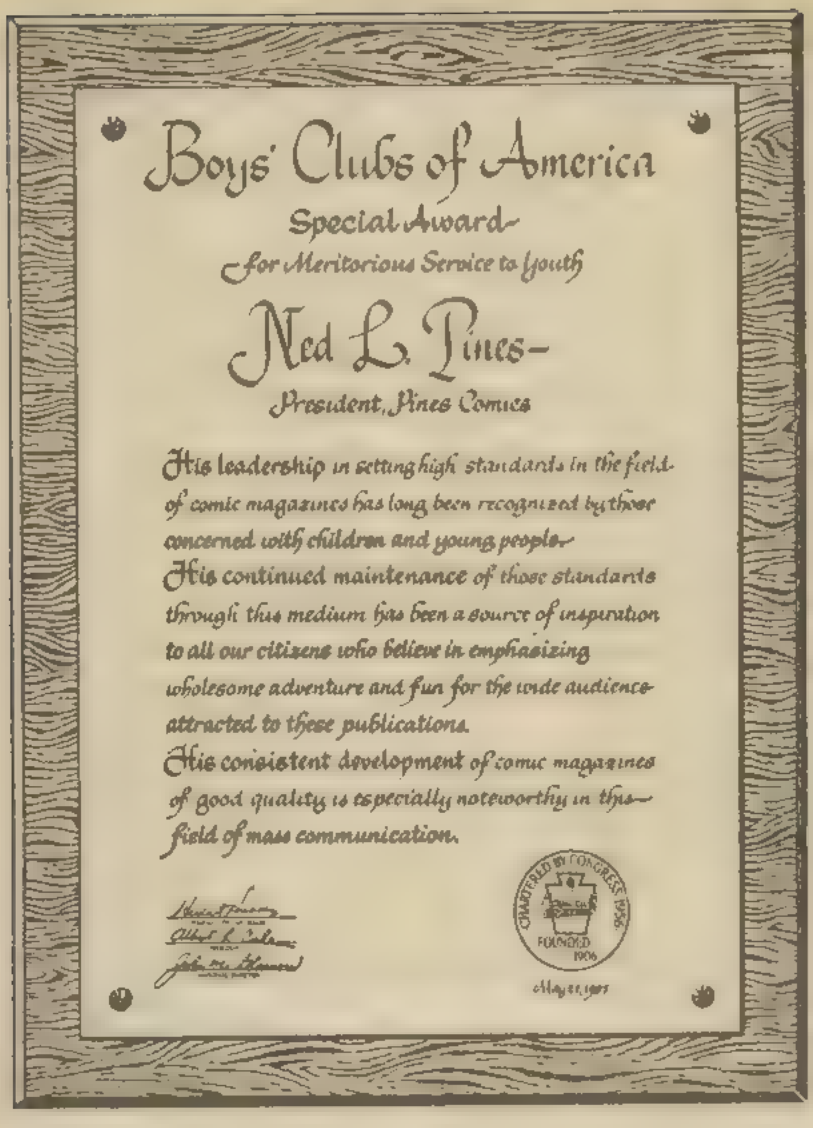
"Jeff," Otis said, "my wife, and my daughter Allie."

Jeff somehow managed to acknowledge the introductions, but Mrs. Bainbridge was only a vague presence in the corner of his vision. He saw only Allie Bainbridge. Allie was about shoulder top high to Jeff, bulgy and curvey fit to make a man fall down in a trance. Her eyes were wide and brown and friendly as a coon dog pup. She smiled frankly at Jeff and the hulking Hooten shuffled over to cut off Jeff's look, glaring at Jeff

"Sit down, gents," Otis said. "Pitch in like you were home."

REGAINING his scattered wits, Jeff recalled his Uncle Huey's windy advice. Uncle Huey was noted for his ability as a ladies man without any of the graces usually attributed to such characters. Uncle Huey was lazy, he made white mule in his own still, got drunk when he felt like it and never lacked for femine attention when he wanted it. Uncle Huey was

(Continued on page 104)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1000 P

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a disgrace to the Colleys and all the respectable folks around home, but Jeff had noticed that the respectable ladies all took the giggles when Uncle Huey started snorting around.

Uncle Huey had fought with Hood's Texans and as he grew older he adopted the military venacular when it suited his purpose and even advanced himself from private grade to field rank. Uncle Huey had told Jeff more than once, "Boy, the secret is attack. Always storm the female bastion. It's so downright astonishing to the respectable petticoats, that they fall apart under a bold attack. Remember that, boy! The same thing for competition, boy. Never hold back because you think the field is took. Attack, boy!"

Jeff tore a bite from a brown drumstick, closed his eyes and chewed then beamed at Allie. "Don't know as I ever tasted better fried chicken. Lots of folks don't know how to slow-cook chicken to retain the natural sweetness!"

Allie blushed, Tobe glared furiously. Otis concealed his start of surprise, and regarded Jeff with sharper interest. Maybe this boy wasn't as innocent as he looked!

Jeff looked at Tobe. "Don't you agree, Mr. Hooten?"

"I've eat better!" Tobe snarled. Then he nearly choked on a huge bite of chicken, shot a guilty glance at Allie and tried to grin. "Well, I mean . . ."

"I can speak English, Tobe Hooten," Allie snapped. "I can guess what you mean!" She suddenly looked close to tears.

Tobe's face got red and he half rose, sending a glare of pure hate at Jeff who had his eyes closed again, savoring the first bite off his second drumstick.

"Somebody is a mighty fine cook around here, Mr. Bainbridge," Jeff said. "You're a lucky man to have two good cooks!"

"The Lord has seen fit to bless this house, Jeff," Otis said. "Pitch right in, son, and enjoy yourself!"

Allie blushed and gave Jeff a soft look and even Mrs. Bainbridge, Otis noticed, moved the gravy closer to Jeff, looking slightly smug. Tobe looked as though he wasn't enjoying his dinner.

You young rascal, Otis thought pleasantly, you'll be even better than I suspected once you're took down a peg. You think you've discovered the secret of easy living, you intend a prosperous, if sinful, existence haunting the race tracks, then a little bad luck and you could easily drift down the primrose path, gambling joints and deadfalls and to no good end!

He looked at Jeff and liked the cut of his jaw and the friendly look in his blue eyes. It must be the Lord's aim to help this young man and Otis Bainbridge was the Lord's instrument. And Old Nig!

"A likely looking mare you were leading in, Jeff," Otis said

Jeff masticated a huge bite of chicken, and Otis didn't miss the sudden innocence that veiled his blue eyes. "Minnie Belle. She's pretty fast."

"Fast, huh? You've raced her?"

"Well," Jeff admitted reluctantly and Otis concealed a smile, "I've raced her a couple of times."

"I got an old plow horse I run now and then," Otis said. "Old Nig."

"Now Otis!" Mrs. Bainbridge said. "This is the Sabbath!"

"So it is," Otis said, and sighed regretfully. "Could be me and Jeff could have got us a race up, just a friendly one, but I guess Jeff is in a hurry to get home and won't want to lay over."

"Well now," Jeff said, "I am in something of a hurry, but maybe it wouldn't hurt to rest my horses up some." Jeff grinned at Allie and Mrs. Bainbridge. "Reckon I couldn't stay long though, with this cooking, I'd get so fat and lazy I wouldn't work at all."

"Be real happy to have you stay over till tomorrow, Jeff," Otis said. "We'd have to get our race over, though. Got a lot of cotton to pick. Must have fifteen bales open now. Be twenty time we're finished. You know any good cotton pickers, Jeff?"

"Nossir," Jeff said. "Heard my Pa tell about how it was done back in Tennessee. Yanked it out of the uh—pods and put it in baskets."

"We use sacks now," Otis said gently. "Just drag 'em along and slap the cotton

right into 'em."

"Well, doggone!" Jeff said. "Is that a fact?"

You young scoundrel, Otis thought happily, I bet you can pick over three hundred pounds a day! Baskets, indeed.

AFTER the meal was finished, the men went out to squat in the shade of the house, Otis talking with Jeff while Tobe maintained a glowering silence. Tobe worried Otis a little. He knew that Tobe would crawl Jeff the minute he had a chance, not at the house, because Tobe knew better than that, but he'd get Jeff sooner or later, even if he had to waylay him when he left. Tobe wasn't the kind of man who could stand being outshined This was Otis's worry. He didn't know how Jeff would stand up in the kind of fight Tobe would make. Jeff looked like the kind of boy who had a lot more friends than enemies, but he was a straightforward type, except when he was getting up a race, and he had the stuff, if he knew how to use it.

Otis sighed. Might as well find out. He stood up. "Got to step down to the barn," he said

Both Jeff and Tobe got up, saying they'd just come along. Otis didn't miss the sudden glare in Tobe's eyes.

Jeff paused in the shade of a tree at the lot fence, and Tobe stopped too. Otis walked leisurely into the barn then moved quickly into a stable and applied his eye to a crack. He was close enough to hear them.

Tobe was glaring at Jeff. "Look, you damn saddle bum," Tobe snarled, "you hit the road Right now. You ain't welcome around here!"

Jeff looked at Tobe Hooten levelly. "I like it here, Hooten, all but having to look at your ugly face. I didn't hear anybody ask you to stay all night."

Otis felt a tingle of alarm as he saw the murderous fury in Hooten's broad face. Hooten was dying to tear Jeff Colley apart a piece at a time, but his slow brain warned him to walk easy while a guest here himself. "Bum," Tobe gritted, "if you're here when the sun goes down you're in for real trouble. I'll stomp you inside out!"

Otis could almost read Jeff's thoughts from the expression on his face. Hooten was strictly brute, muscles and rage, right now he was wild with jealousy, and capable of murder. But Jeff lacked forty pounds of Hooten's weight and the solidity of his years.

All that must have been obvious to Jeff, yet there was no avoiding a showdown with Hooten unless he rode on. Jeff's reactions brought a grin to Otis's face that was both pleased and worried. Jeff wasn't a boy who put off things that were inevitable.

Jeff grinned at Hooten. "Tut, tut, Hooten, my boy," Jeff said in a tone one would use to a small boy, "you're just jealous of Allie. Now you run along home, son, and look in the mirror and be honest with yourself. Do you think a pretty little gal like Allie would put up with a ugly character like you? Why just to smell you every day would soon turn her sour on the world. Why, Hootey, you could fumigate a hogpen by just walking past."

With a wordless bawl of rage, Hooten charged Jeff.

"Please, Lord," Otis Bainbridge then breathed, "protect Thy wayward children from sprained backs and broken bones, I've still got twenty bales of cotton to pick." Otis grabbed a spare singletree off the harness rack and charged outside.

It looked bad for Jeff Colley. Tobe Hooten charged like a mad bull, huge arms milling in a fury of blows, but it pleased Otis to note no panic in Jeff's eyes, only an angry alertness. The way that boy dodged was a caution, Otis thought.

Then Otis almost yelled his encouragement as Hooten slowed a little to get his breath, and Jeff slipped in quickly to slam a hard fist against Tobe's nose then another in Tobe's belly. There was plenty of steam behind those fists because Tobe's nose flattened and spurted blood, his mouth flew open and he gagged for breath. Jeff hit him again, on the jaw, a tooth loosening sizzler that would make Tobe

eat soft boiled eggs for a week.

It looked bad for Hooten, and Otis gaped, wondering if Jeff was going to whip Tobe Hooten without getting his shirttail out of his pants. Then Otis gasped as Tobe lunged forward, fast for his hulking looks, and grabbed Jeff in a bear hug, burying his bloody face against Jeff's neck. Jeff's mouth flew open as those crushing arms tightened, then Jeff slammed a high heel down on Hooten's foot.

HOOTEN cried out hoarsely and Jeff wrenched free, but the high heels were his undoing then. He stumbled and Hooten launched a furious blow that cracked against Jeff's jaw. Jeff spilled backward to the ground. Hooten shouted and jumped at him

"Hold it, Tobe!" Otis roared, lifting the singletree. "I'll brain the first man jumps the other on the ground! Stand up fight!"

"I'll stomp his head off!" Tobe yelled

Otis hit Tobe in the belly with the singletree. "Stand back!"

Tobe stood glaring at Otis, murderously glaring, but he moved back. Jeff got to his feet and Tobe charged in again.

Jeff managed to avoid the rush, going down and aside and at the same time using his momentum to swing for Tobe's belly. The fist connected and Tobe was suddenly still, mouth hanging wide open for air Jeff hit him again, a measured blow that snapped Tobe's mouth shut and sent him to the ground in a loose, gagging heap

Jeff staggered to the horsetrough and soused his head, patting the lump on his jaw tenderly. Otis kept his distance, his face solemn but he winked at Jeff who managed a passable grin

Despite his banged up appearance and swollen nose, Tobe Hooten didn't go home, but sat around with the others in a scowling silence. Otis gave both of them a windy desertation on peace and brotherly love and saw it bounce off his subjects like corn off a chicken's back. Tobe stayed until Otis announced bedtime

He was back next morning before they finished breakfast. Otis's eyes twinkled and Allie looked exasperated. Otis winked at Jeff who returned it solemnly.

As Jeff went down to the barn to curry and brush Minnie Belle, Otis whispered to Allie, "Honey, turn my sack over and piece it out a little longer this morning. I figure Jeff is a real good cotton picker once he sets his mind on it!"

Allie looked at her father straight and steady. "Papa, are you fixing to sharp Jeff in that horse race?"

"Shuck no, honey. Jeff is dying for a race. He's got a pocketful of gold he's won racing that little mare, and he's some blowed up over it. He's a good boy and I feel it my bounden duty to straighten him out and turn him from the primrose path to honest toil!"

Allie came mighty close to an unladylike snort. The smile left her eyes then. "Papa, I'm worried. Tobe Hooten is mean and you know it. If you trap Jeff into staying, Tobe is liable to hurt Jeff "

Otis concealed his own worry along the same lines. "Honey, Jeff don't need much of a chance to stay now he's seen you. And who knows the Lord's will? Jeff might get killed before he got a mile away." Allie blushed and Otis went on gently, "Are we going to let Tobe run all your prospects off, honey?"

Allie blushed again. "I'll go turn your sack over," she said.

Otis went after Old Nig, and he didn't miss Jeff's quickly concealed grin when he led the bony black into the lot and half-heartedly picked at the mane loaded with cockleburrs. The tail of Old Nig was in the same shape as his mane, a huge lump of burrs. Otis gave it up and saddled Nig and led him over beside the shining Minnie Belle as Jeff cinched on his saddle.

"Well, Jeff, you reckon Minnie Belle can stay in sight of Old Nig here?"

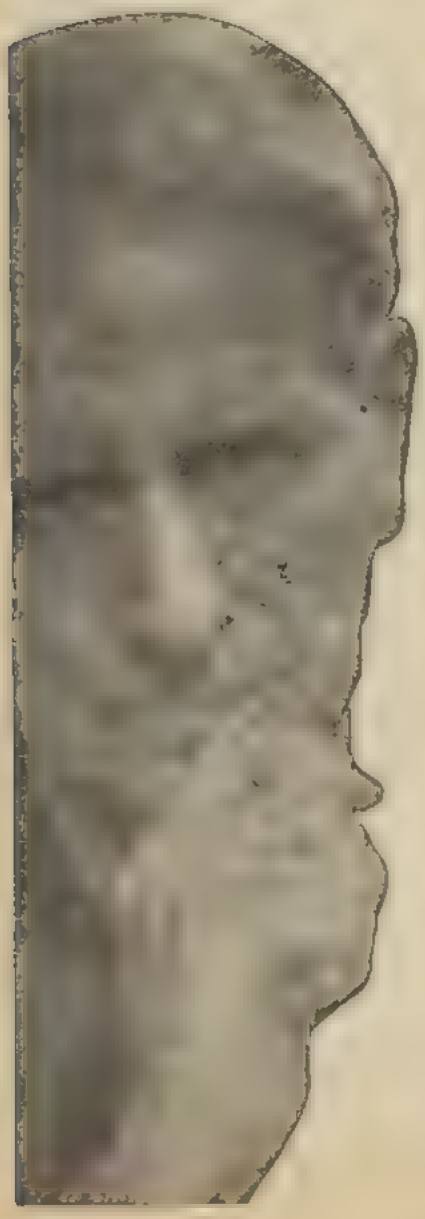
"She'll try right hard," Jeff said having difficulty concealing his elation. "A small wager?"

"Well," Otis said reluctantly, "I ain't one to spoil a man's fun, but I'm warning you, Nig is purty fast."

"How about a—hundred?"

Otis pretended not to notice Jeff's break, knowing the boy thought not to

To The Man With
HERNIA
Who Can Not Submit to Surgery



THE MAN condemned to live with rupture, all too often faces a grim future.

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scare him off with a bigger bet. "Well, that ain't hardly worth running for, but I reckon Old Nig won't shy off at a hundred."

"You want to bet more?" Jeff was almost trembling. "If you do, I got another two hundred to go with the first one!"

"That's better," Otis said. "Still and all, old Nig here is a temptation to me. Tell you what, I'll put up Nig here and another hundred against both your horses. Fair?"

"Yeah, but I reckon I'd better not bet Minne—"

" 'Course not, if you're scared she won't win."

"All right, it's a bet," Jeff said. "Three hundred and my horses against your horse and four hundred."

"Right."

At Otis's shout, Allie came to the barn carrying a canvas sack and from it Otis counted out four hundred dollars, nearly emptying the sack. Jeff added his money and a bill of sale to the pile. Tobe Hooten stood by, little eyes gleaming first at the money then at Jeff. It was plain that Tobe expected Jeff to lose and was enjoying the thought.

OTIS pointed out a tree some two hundred yards away, the ground affording a level surface for the entire distance. The first one back from around the tree and past the lot gate would be the winner. Tobe would pound a plow sweep for the starting signal. They mounted and sat ready. Tobe hit the sweep with a hammer, and the ringing note was quivering high and loud when the two horses took off.

The Nig horse was running easily beside Minnie Belle, apparently not caring if he fell down or not, but Minnie Belle didn't seem able to pass him even when she backed her ears and got down to business. Nig's ungainly neck with its load of cockleburrs began to poke out in front.

Before they reached the tree, Jeff Colley knew that he had been taken. There was an all gone feeling in his stomach that became a dejected weight as Old Nig stumbled past the lot gate thirty feet ahead of Minnie Belle. Tobe Hooten was shouting, and laughing, jeering at Jeff, and it took all of Jeff's control to maintain a stiff face and prevent him murdering Tobe or to keep his lips from quivering. Silently, he handed the reins of Minnie Belle to Otis Bainbridge.

"The fortunes of racing," Otis said. "Man never knows if he'll eat."

"Well, saddle tramp!" Tobe shouted. "You're just plain tramp now!"

Jeff got a wild look in his eyes and Otis gave Tobe a stern stare. "That'll be enough of that, Tobe."

Tobe was still chuckling and grinning when Allie came over to Jeff. Tobe stopped grinning then.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," she said.

Jeff looked at Allie and summoned a wry grin. "Me too, but I asked for it. I can't complain. I never hesitated to collect my bets!"

"I'd think there were more satisfactory ways to make a living," Allie said.

"I'm beginning to think so too," Jeff said.

Otis came over to them. "Well, Jeff looks like I got twice as much temptation now! You wouldn't want to buy Minnie back, would you, or your riding horse?"

"What with?" Jeff said. "I'm flat."

Otis Bainbridge looked thoughtful, then his eye fell on the cotton patch nearby and his eyes brightened hopefully. "Tell you what, Jeff, I sort of took a liking to you and I'll hire you to pick cotton. Price is fifty cents a hundred and board yourself, but like I said, I sort of like you and I'll board you and pay you fifty cents. You can buy back your horse. Both of them for a hundred fifty to remove temptation from me."

Jeff's eyes were bright as he regarded Otis. "Well, Mr. Bainbridge, long as I have to do something, I reckon I couldn't work for a better man."

"Now watch out, son," Otis said, his eyes twinkling, "first thing you know I'll raise you to sixty cents." He looked at his daughter. "Allie, can you scare up another sack someplace for Jeff?"

Allie was smiling at her father. "I think so, Papa, it just happens that I worked

over your old sack this morning, early. It's still good since you hurt your back last spring and haven't used it any to speak of so far."

Tobe Hooten had been taking in the new developments with rising rage. Now he snarled, "Otis, you ain't keeping that bum here in the same house with Allie? Him alone in the field all day—"

"Tobe," Otis cut in, "are you insinuating anything about my daughter?"

Tobe lost some of his rage with alacrity and alarm. "'Course not. It just ain't safe for Allie. You ain't going to do it, Otis."

"Tobe," Otis said gently, "you ain't married to Allie yet, and you ain't bossing this farm yet. I somehow doubt you ever will."

"Are you siding against me for that tramp?" Tobe shouted, red in the face.

"I've got twenty bales of cotton to pick," Otis said. "We got pretty weather now but it might turn bad next week. I'm hiring a cotton picker. I offered you a job Tobe, but you had too much to do at your place. Allie will need somebody to empty her sack, that's sure a hot job and hard for a woman."

"I got my two bales out," Tobe shouted. "I aim to pick and I'll empty Allie's sack!"

"Well now," Otis said pleased, "you light out home, Tobe for your sack. We're fixing to hit the cotton patch."

Glaring, Tobe finally wheeled away and started in a hunched over walk for home and his sack. Otis' face was solemn but his brown eyes were twinkling as he looked at Jeff and his daughter.

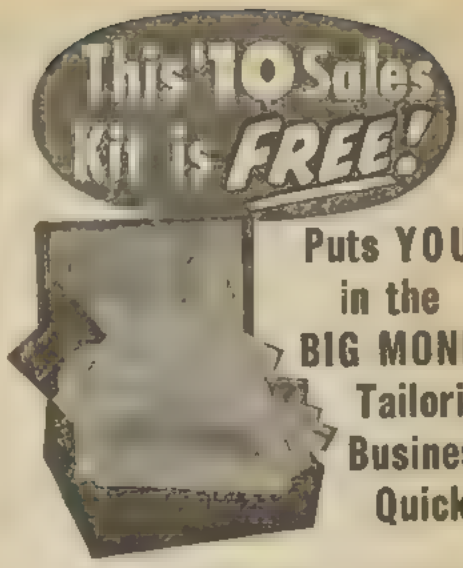
Jeff regarded Otis with admirable and finally they grinned at each other. Otis said, "Now, Jeff, I just saved you a hot old job emptying an extra sack!"

"Mr. Bainbridge," Jeff said, "I'm plumb surprised you ain't a millionaire. I'm lucky I didn't lose no more than my money and horses!"

Otis said solemnly, "The Lord's servant must be humble, son, and the good Lord hates a greedy man. Live and let live, I say."

They grinned at each other.

(Turn page)



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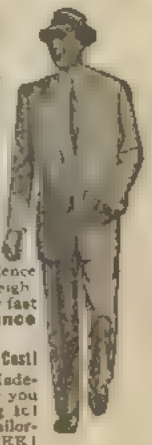

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JEFF COLLEY replaced his shoe-high heel boots for a pair of Otis' shoes, and the fancy creased stetson for a straw hat. And he proved to be even a better cotton picker than Otis had suspected. By the end of the first week, even with his soreness, Jeff was topping four hundred a day, and by the end of the second week he was levelled off between four hundred seventy and four hundred ninety. Otis went around grinning.

But Tobe lost his grin a little every day and by the end of the third week, he wasn't grinning any. Tobe Hooten had Otis really worried. Tobe had been his usual loud and blustery self. Then as Jeff's picking went up when the best Tobe could do was two hundred eighty, Tobe began to get quieter. He got even more quiet as Allie consistantly beat him from ten to twenty pounds each weighing. Allie and Jeff hit it off fine and by the end of the third week they were taking three rows together, leaving Tobe either way behind with his two rows, or falling behind themselves if Tobe only took one.

Tobe couldn't lag within earshot with one row else he'd fall even farther back at weighing time. It was more than Tobe's frustrated rage could take. He got so he never said a word. There was more in Tobe's marble round eyes now than a broken nose and ribs. There was pure murder. It worried Otis until he couldn't sleep nights or stay far from the cotton patch days. Otis took to carrying his old cap-and-ball pistol with him.

Friday at noon on the third week, Tobe quit. That evening Allie and Jeff lacked a hundred pounds of having completed a full bale, but they didn't seem to mind. They could snatch out a hundred Saturday morning early and Otis could still haul it off by mid-morning. They went to the field by daylight.

The bottom cotton was heavy with dew and they decided to wait a while until the sun could dry it a little. There wasn't that much of a rush. They sat down on their sacks by the nearly full wagon.

They kept stealing glances at each other and their small talk dwindled to silence. Finally Jeff looked at Allie and swallowed determinedly.

"Allie. I—well, I—"

Allie's eyes were bright, her face showing a blush. "What, Jeff?"

Jeff's face got red then pale. "Well, I—Doggone it! Allie, will you marry me?"

Allie smiled. "Yes, Jeff."

"You will? Well, doggone."

Jeff got around to it then, and took Allie into his arms. She returned his kiss with tenderness and enthusiasm that made up for lack of experience.

"I love you, Allie," Jeff said. "I'll sure try to make you a real good husband."

Allie snuggled against him. "I know you will, Jeff." She kissed him. "Why did you wait so long? It's been ages since I knew I loved you."

Jeff hugged her until she gasped for breath. He kissed her. Finally, he said, "Honey, I got forty head of cows on my brother's place near Austin. I could sell them to Tom, and buy some more up here if you'd rather live here. I think I'd like it better myself. It's not so hot. I'd have to rent us a place at first."

"Why not see Papa," Allie said practically. "He's got two sections of land here and he don't like to farm as well as he does seeing after his horses and cattle He'd let you have all the farming land you wanted."

"I'll see him," Jeff said. "I—"

JEFF [illegible] Tobe Hooten who'd stepped around the wagon and stood glaring at him. The hulking man's face was slack with rage and his breath whistled through loose lips and partly open mouth, his eyes were red rimmed and crazy with fury. He held a foot long butcher knife in his hand

"Hugging and kissing," Hooten shouted hoarsely. "I knew it. I'll teach you to steal my girl, you damned tramp! I aim to kill you, Colley!"

Allie screamed. "Tobe, put that knife away! Don't you dare touch Jeff."

"You're my girl," Hooten shouted. "I aim to marry up with you."

"I wouldn't marry you, ever!" Allie

screamed. "I hate you'

With a wordless shout, Hooten charged Jeff.

Jeff shoved Allie, came off the sack in a rolling lunge that carried him beyond the first swipe of the knife. The strap of Jeff's cotton sack was still over his shoulder and as he lunged the twelve foot sack was stretched out behind him.

With a triumphant shout, Tobe leaped onto the sack. The abrupt weight jerking Jeff off balance and bringing him to his knees. Tobe lunged up the sack thus keeping his weight on it, the murderous butcher knife lifting. But desperation was in Jeff Colley, and he got his feet under him and threw himself backward with a drive of his powerful legs. The sack shot forward under Tobe's feet, jerking them from under him, sitting him down hard. Jeff didn't hesitate, he threw himself forward at Tobe, shoving the sack upward and off his shoulders at the same time. He fell across Tobe, the sack's double thickness over Tobe.

Tobe struck blindly with the knife. The sharp blade plunged through the sack, spending part of its force and stabbing Jeff in the leg. Jeff leaped away.

"Jeff!" Allie screamed. "Here, Jeff."

Jeff darted a look at Allie and saw her pitch the foot long three-quarter inch iron pin that secured the doubletree to the wagon tongue. Jeff caught the heavy iron with the U of iron on the end that served as a wheel wrench. He whirled to meet Tobe's lunge as he cleared the sack.

The pin glanced off Tobe's head, and Jeff felt the sting of the knife blade against his ribs. He wheeled as Tobe came at him again, and the iron slammed solidly against Tobe's head. Tobe wilted to the ground, his little eyes crossed. Jeff sank to the ground, too, feeling the hot blood running down his side, and the burning pain in his leg. Allie rushed to him.

Hoofs thundered from toward the house, and Otis Bainbridge on Nig came to a dirt-throwing stop. He looked at Tobe then at Jeff. "You hurt bad, son?"

"Just a couple of places," Jeff said. "I

[Turn page]

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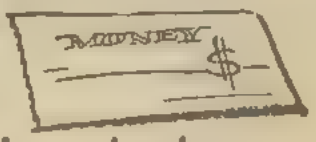

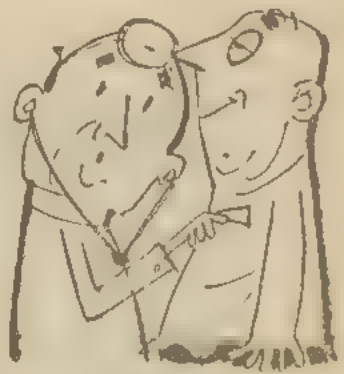

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don't know for sure."

"Me and Jeff are going to get married," Allie said. Her face was dead white, her arms tight around Jeff's neck.

"Well, are you now?" Otis said. "I reckon you'll not, honey, if you choke him to death first." Allie loosened her hold and looked about to faint. Otis said, "Honey, run up to the house on Nig and bring the team. I got them harnessed in the lot. We'll take this bale off short and get Jeff sewed up. That's a nasty gash on his ribs."

Allie ran and Otis turned to Tobe Hooten who was sitting up blinking. Tobe got to his feet and stood staring at them. Otis walked over close to him and cocked the pistol. Tobe's eyes shifted to the muzzle of the gun not a foot from his nose. He began to look scared

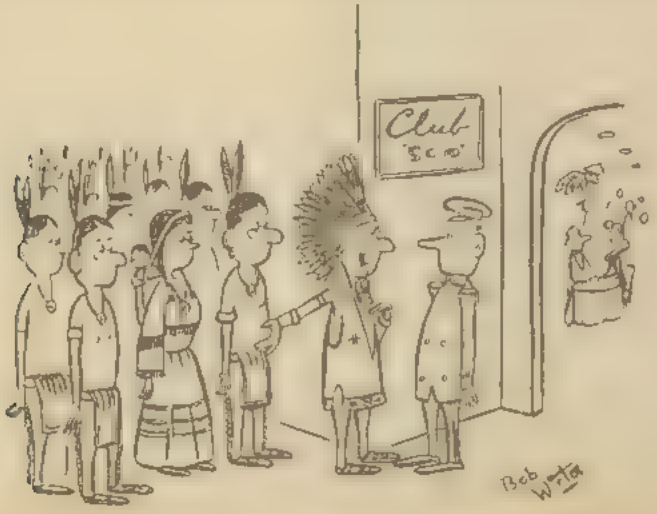
"Tobe," Otis said and now his voice was thin and hard, "I ought to kill you where you stand. Just sass me once and I'll do it! Now you listen. You came on my land and tried to murder an unarmed man. I'm taking Jeff to town and I'm telling the sheriff and swearing out an attempted murder warrant. I'd say you got about three hours before the sheriff can get here, to make tracks out of the county. I'd advise you to use those hours making tracks. Now get!"

Tobe got.

Nearly fifteen hundred pounds of cotton made it a soft ride for Jeff with the added softness of his head in Allie's lap. Otis reckoned calmly, that Jeff was too numb with love to feel much pain. Otis grinned and kept his eyes forward but he couldn't help but note, seeing as how he wasn't deaf, that Allie had kissed him four times in the last minute and a half.

Now a young fellow just getting married would want him some farming land and maybe some pasture for a few cattle. It sure looked like a man getting rent off cotton and corn could afford most of his time to raising horses and cattle, trading a little and such like.

A young couple starting out ought to have a good team, he reckoned he'd just have to give those young'uns a pair of mules for a wedding present, and they'd need some riding horses. Allie would be pretty as a picture on that sleek little Minnie Belle, and Jeff would be happy with his riding horse back. A good steady married man wouldn't have much time to think of racing a horse. Except now and then, sort of friendly like, and of course, to help do the Lord's will. Maybe help set some worthy young man back on the right path.



'This time me bring reservation like you ask for

BOOTHILL GUNS

(Continued from page 54)

McTavish's coffin. He reached inside the coffin and brushed dirt away from a brown package sealed with gobs of red wax. A package of U.S. currency, about the size of a two-pound buttermold, addressed to the Fort Presidio paymaster.

"Here's your loot, Keele," Jim Hatfield said, and tossed the package straight up past the coroner's fat shape. "Catch!"

With a shout of triumph, Keele reached out to snatch from mid-air the bundle of money he had secreted in the coffin some eight hours before. And then the sound died in his throat as, from the tail of his eye, he saw moonlight flash on gunmetal down in the depths of the open grave.

X. T. Keele looked down, into the muzzlye of a Colt .44 clutched in Jim Hatfield's hand.

"Bullet Bob McTavish's gun, Keele," the Lone Wolf Ranger said. "The one you yourself put in his dead hand. Remember?"

X. T. Keele jerked trigger, to drive a wistling slug into the wall of the grave alongside Hatfield, poised asquat on the closed front lid of his old friend's coffin. But Hatfield did not miss. McTavish's sixguns had seldom missed.

Flame spurted from a dead man's gun and the bullet caught X. T. Keele below the left eye and ripped out a chunk of skull as it mushroomed through the brain and out the back of his head. The drilling impact of it knocked the coroner backwards, eyes staring sightlessly at the Texas moon.

The dumfounded witness to this incredible miracle, Hal Cavendall, dropped his shovel and reached down to give the Texas Ranger a hand out of the grave. In a boil of drifting gunsmoke, Hatfield reached down to pull the $50,000 payroll parcel from Keele's lax grip.

"Here," he said, thrusting the package in Cavendall's hand. "Get going—you've kept Trixie waiting in that closet long enough. I'll be along after I've had a chance to tell an old friend thanks—and adios."

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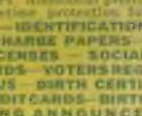

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